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KANDAN, THE PATRIOT

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KANDAN, THE PATRIOT

BY

K. S. VENKATARAMANI



SVETARANYA ASHRAMA

MYLAPORE, MADRAS

TO
THE UNKNOWN VOLUNTEER
IN INDIA'S FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

First Published: January, 1932

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CHAPTER I

THE TODDY-SHOP AT AKKUR

(1)

Akkur is a beauty spot on the short branch line from Mayavaram to Tranquebar, the Queen of the Coromandel coast.

There was a stillness in the evening air, though the ocean lay to the east barely three miles off. The sea-breeze had not yet set in. It seemed to loiter round the trembling crest of the waves, kissing the water-line and scattering the foam that embroidered the endless shores of the sea. .

It was five minutes past four. No. 9 had just whistled its departure to Mayavaram. The small, vagabondish train of five coaches was pulled by an old battered engine that had seen better days on the main line when it ran as the Tuticorin Express. Still it had a bit of its old vigour and made up for lack of it by plenty of rattling noise. It loved its work on the new branch line though the virgin track seemed to groan under the vicious strokes of

this old, battered engine. It sped and lilted, lilted and sped, and thundered along the fresh-shining rails with a rollicking joy in motion.

(2)

The whistle that sped No. 9 was the signal for the rally of life at the toddy-shop at Akkur. This pleasure shop for the poor stood like a hermitage in a cocoanut garden facing a wide sheet of water, the village tank, to which the workmen came for their daily bath every evening after the hard work in the fields. The bath at the matin hour cooled their heated bodies, and this pleasant toddy drink made up for the loss of warmth.

The toddy-shop at Akkur was the eldest born of the railroad from Mayavaram to Tranquebar. The construction of this branch line had rushed in such a flood of money that the toddy-shop, from its opening day, hummed like a bee-hive, and the silver of the sweated poor flowed in a stream.

For two thousand years, since the days of Kari-kalan, the Chola king, when Akkur was the centre of gaiety of his royal city of Puhar, there was no toddy-shop at Akkur. But the railroad wrought a change far beyond the reach of kings.

The moment it was known that the branch line

was sanctioned, the leading excise contractor of the place, one who had become a millionaire on this cheap drink for the poor, had sent in his garland of roses knitted on threads of gold, and a basket of lemons, ripe and yellow, to the local gods that anoint and consecrate a new toddy-shop. The net result was that, before the first sod was cut on the Mayavaram-Tranquebar line, the toddy-shop at Akkur was in full working order.

The great Mr. Mudaliar, the local magnate, eventually became the lessee, as it was deftly suggested to him that the lord of thirty thousand cocoanut trees was but the proper lord of a toddy-shop nearby—gold in one's own land, should it be worked by another? Mr. Mudaliar was young and unmarried, imaginative and enterprising, and his apprentice hand was always prompted by a curious experimenting mind, with deadly effect on ancestral riches. He had already exhausted several forms of pioneering industry, rice mill, bus service and railroad contract. For the Tamil genius readily lends itself to three forms of enterprise, toddy-shop, rice mill and bus service, not to speak of the primary enterprise of cooking and catering.

Why not try a toddy-shop though it was generally considered by the idle folk as dishonourable?

If rearing cocoanut trees is a merit, why is tapping it for this sweet and mild drink of the Tamils a sin? Part at least of the wages he paid so generously to his idle tenants would come back to him. He argued thus just to ease his own conscience and show the incisive quality of his mind.

Mr. Mudaliar, of course, could not attend to the details of this wretched business. So he left practically the real administration of it into the hands of his friend, the leading excise contractor of the place. And he saw to it, with such cheap and plentiful supply of toddy, that the shop hummed like a bee-hive.

(3)

The rally to a toddy-shop at the evening hour is a sight of imperishable memory. And at Akkur the toddy-shop was new and the rally was really a run from the fields to the shop with the joy of a child that goes to the sweet-meat shop straight from the school. Toddy was new to almost everyone round about Akkur except for a few aged veterans to whom distance had never been a bar.

It was a miscellaneous group that had gathered there that evening. But it was divided into well-knit clans for the call of pleasure.

Nandan, Mookkan and Katteri led the band of aged veterans who rather seemed to think that this drink for the stalwarts had been wrongly brought within the lazy reach of all.

Irullan, Karuppan and Irullappan led the band of daring youngsters who were as quick and rich at work as at revolt. They walked into the toddy-shop with the swing and swagger of youth.

These two groups belonged to the 'untouchable' classes. But they were the most intimate in touch with Mother Earth. For they were the real tillers of the soil. And Amavasai, the *talayari*, stood all by himself, firm and motionless like a sculptured god in granite in the infinite beauty of his bare brawn and muscle.

Govindan, Pavadai and Nallan marched with their own kinsmen and friends with greater decorum and more of suppressed joy but with a prick of conscience shining guiltily over their lowered faces. For they came from the proud *padayachi* clan, which once formed the backbone of the Tamil infantry in the valorous days of the Chola and Nayak kings of Tanjore. Still they showed a spark of their old fire in starting the angry quarrels of the toddy-shop. They took the offensive in all matters and broke the more massive strength and *elan* of

Nandan, Mookkan and Katteri, Irullan, Karuppan and Irullappan.

But this straggling army of day workers, accepted neither on earth nor in Heaven, showed the gaiety of the gods at the toddy-shop. They had not a square inch of ground in all the wide spaces on earth either for home or for field, but toiled on with sweat on brow in the narrow ruts of an ancient system now ploughed to deep mire by modern economic forces.

(4)

Nandan, the leader of the first group, who never got himself reconciled to these new votaries to drink, began his usual lament to his friend.

"Mookka, look at these fellows, how crude they are: one is born to the great art of drinking and never made; they can't learn the graces in a day, the sober and the gentle way. These youngsters don't know how even to raise gracefully the pot to the lips and sip the nectar with a gentle whirl. They drink it like water gulping it down. Pooh! look at our *talayari*. Amavasai may be a fine fellow in the fields with his long pole and lashing whip in hand. But he's nowhere here in the toddy-shop, like a fish on land."

Nandan was seventy years old but had a firm grip round the neck of the pot. He spoke slowly and in a grave voice, and in his rolling looks experience shone bright. He expressed at every turn a slight resentment and contempt at the so many raw new comers to a very ancient pleasure, who had incidentally sent up the price of toddy and sent down its quality.

"Nanda, we must teach them a lesson one day with the rod, so that they may know we are the masters at least here. Amavasai may be our *talayari*, but here in the toddy-shop he's worse than a broken pot. We must teach him his place," Mookkan said in a low tone.

Katteri, who was till now preoccupied with the third pot, turned round his fierce looks and growled with a vacant laugh, "Mookka, you are as wrong as ever, and don't know, for all your age and bulk, the true cause of things."

Mookkan coughed dissent, but not heeding it Katteri proceeded, "Amavasai rules only over our little clan of pariahs but the true secret of his power is that he is backed by Nallan who is in turn backed by our lord. Look at it deeply, Nanda, you understand these matters better than our cousin Mookkan, for all his burly head,

eagle nose and big body—we toil all day long and barely make the surplus money for this little and only joy of our lives—a pot a day.”

Katteri rolled his eyes in anger and began in a voice of thunder, “A pot of toddy is the only friend the pariah has all the world over. Have we milk or honey, fruits or flowers, or any of the dainties that go to feed our ruling folk? Have we an inch of ground for home or field? Even our wedded wives are but our master’s farm servants; our darling child is the shepherd-boy roaming over mud and mire, stones and thorns, tending the cows whose milk only goes down the throat of another. Nanda, tell me,—you have shrewd eyes, what is a pariah’s life worth but for a pot of toddy?”

Both Nandan and Mookkan violently nodded their heads in approval of this declamation, and Katteri continued taking encouragement from their nods and another pot of toddy. “Nallan makes five times the money we make for all our sweated labour. Do you think it’s all made the right way? Nallan is in charge of the granary, and you know that Mr. Mudaliar is away twenty days out of thirty. There is a rat-hole in the granary and Nallan is in special charge of it day and night.”

Katteri growled at this good luck of another

man. For he had in his younger days the best reputation as a granary-rat, and the long hands which Nature had given him in its most intuitive mood he had made the finest use of.

Nandan, Mookkan and Katteri had to face none of the keener problems of life that ordinarily fall to the lot of these semi-serfs. For, the great Mr. Mudaliar's father had given them, in recognition of some signal service done to him in an hour of need, a monthly pension of two *kalams* of paddy. The signal act of service was that they had raided a hostile village in the neighbourhood and harvested the fields, all at dead of night, and carried off the booty before dawn. And this freedom and leisure they used for cultivating the fine art of conversation, like prosperous lawyers at the club table.

(5)

The other group was equally busy both with the tongue and the pot: Irullan, Karuppan and Irullappan.

"Irulla, how did you find the money for the day? I've been put to very hard straits. You've had no job in the fields for a week," asked Karuppan who was in the regular service of Mr. Mudaliar as a *pannaial*.

Irullan too was once in the regular service but fared ill in all team work. Though he worked the hardest of all, he always found that arrears were thrown on his head. Finally he was dismissed as he incurred the anger of Amavasai in the division of the spoils of a theft in which Irullan did all the daring and Amavasai all the sharing.

"Well, Karuppa, how to find the money? I beat my wife till I got it."

"How?"

"How? This way," he brandished his brawny right hand stroking the air and said, "till she gave up her secret treasure—the little silver anklet."

"The silver anklet of your dear boy, now no more!"

"Yes, she treasured it that she might weep hours over it. I'll have no more of it, and the bother is over. But tell me, how did you manage for the day, Karuppa? Your wages too are in arrears for over a fortnight and your lord is always away speeding in and out in his motor car."

"Yes, Irulla, it's better to starve and die than to work in this wretched *pannai* where cattle are better housed and fed than men. This place is good only for thieves and cheats like Amavasai and Nallan. I hadn't a wink of sleep overnight. You

know the big *karuvelam* tree on the channel, uprooted by the recent floods, and so many coveting it. With borrowed axe I worked at it the whole of last night, and made five bundles of firewood. I walked the ten miles to Mayavaram at dead of night with my wife and my boy carrying the heavy loads, two each, over secret ways and thorny paths oftentimes knee deep in hidden mud and mire—well, only to sell them just at break of dawn for half the price; stolen things, you know, even trees whose bowels have been ripped open, carry a stolen look everywhere even miles away; sold the five for a rupee, and here's the silver piece intact." Karuppan chuckled with joy, and Irullan cast measured glances of envy.

Karuppan continued the story, the silver disc attracting the full eye of the house, "I've the whole rupee now, here it's—my wife begged of me for an anna for glass bangles—and what do you think I did? I twisted her hands till she cried no more for bangles and I followed it up with a slap on the face. My boy who bore the bundles bravely through mire and thorn, asked for an anna for two *iddlies*—I gave him a blow on the mouth and a kick on the knees. Here is the full rupee so saved from foul attack, and is that not good for three days, Irulla, on the most liberal scale?"

"But, Karuppa, if you are caught and whipped for the theft! There's Amavasai, the *talayari*, and Nallan too."

"I'm not afraid of him. The drink-shop is an equal place for all. What if he is the *talayari*? I'll buy him over with a pot. Well, Amavasai, how is your luck for the day?"

"Well, lazy loots, mind your own business. Karuppa, where did you steal that rupee?"

"Dear cousin, if I've stolen it, you have your share in it."

"Then it is another matter."

"Amavasai, you are indeed a fine fellow and deserve to be our *talayari* for ever. Long live the granary-heaps and the rat-holes and our dear Amavasai," cried in the same voice Irullan, Karuppan and Irullappan.

Irullappan was glad that in the increasing tumult of intoxication no questions were put to him to disclose his resources for the day. For, he had quite a month ago consolidated his exchequer by a bold act of theft of a gold necklace of a guest in the very garden house of Mr. Mudaliar and had the prudence and economy to negotiate it with the salesman of the toddy-shop and get the proceeds allotted for a month's drink.

(6)

The third group, Govindan, Pavadai and Nallan, were the aristocrats of the toddy-shop. They were equally busy with the tongue and the pot. Nallan was their acknowledged leader and held the position of *maniyam* or chief executive field-officer of Mr. Chockalinga Mudaliar's *pannai*.

"Nallan, you are growing discontented of late with Mr. Mudaliar's ways. Why not we give up this job of 'rat-holes' and minor thefts, and do some honest work elsewhere," Govindan, his cousin, gently prodded Nallan. Govindan never missed a chance to promote some misunderstanding between his cousin and Mr. Mudaliar. "We starve day and night while our lord feasts in his house strange men from far-away places, like a prince royal, gay and reckless. The times have changed and old-time prestige is gone for ever from land and name. And as Kandan, our saint, says there will soon be a terrible crash everywhere."

"Yes, Govinda, you are right. My pay is in arrears now for eighteen months. The chief agents have their own way, and the master is always away. Half the land is still lying fallow for the year, and the peasantry is discontented for all my

scowls and Amavasai's whips; and Mr. Mudaliar is head over ears lost in the Council elections, just only to beat the other fellow from Negapatam. Our wages go to the feeding up of idle official folk."

"You talk quite like Kandan and you've caught his voice well indeed, Nallan. The food we raise with so much of hard work we've no share in, as you say. Why should we put up with it? Dear cousin, lead us bravely and we would follow you to death. Amavasai will bring his men to your side and help you with the bravest and cleverest of the lot. Dare he go against your wish? Gather all these idle fellows before you, these knaves and thieves together and make men of them, as Kandan says. Well, do some clean and good work and you alone can show us the way. I swear by this sacred drink that I'll stand by you to death."

"Yes, that is what Kandan says so fervently and in noble speech. Stand together and work for the common good and give up this drink—a curse indeed."

"Yes, dear brother, let us obey his words as words from Heaven." Pavadai spoke with feeling, "Kandan is a saint, a noble soul. I saw him in his *ashrama* this morning, distributing

charka and *khaddar* clothes to the poor and the suffering. People say he is mighty rich in Natal and as great as the Collector *Dorai* at Tanjore, if only he cared to be that. He was very kind and dear to me." Pavadai was the younger brother of Nallan and a bright lad of sixteen.

"Pavadai, he is kind to all, and has a special liking for you. For you alone of all of us here have had a little schooling. It's a pity I was not put to school; and a double pity that I was not able to put you up for higher study. I'd even have made the rat-holes bigger in the grain-heap, but this toddy-shop came in the way, alas! And it has thrown us all on the mound of waste—but everything is going wrong. Mr. Mudaliar too cannot carry on like this for long."

"Though young, brother, I too feel that there must come a grand change in our village life and that this toddy-shop must go. It has been the un-making of our family. Kandan is the man to make men of us. Let us follow his words. Maybe, he could even change Mr. Mudaliar too some day,—there's a magnet glow in his eyes, a purifying fire in his looks."

"That's impossible even if the gods came straight from Heaven, Pavadai. The young flesh

is already too deep in the mire. You should see his aged mother with her weeping eyes, weeping at the ways of her unmarried boy. It breaks the heart—there comes Kandan,—yes, with a pure glow in his face. Let us all prostrate before him though we don't follow his words."

Nallan spoke with the true ring of sincerity in his voice.

CHAPTER II

DEW-DROPS ON LOTUS-BUDS

(1)

A magnificent bridge, far superior to the traffic it carries, and inconsistent with the paltry traditions of the D. P. W. (Department of Public Works), spans the river Adyar very near its mouth. The river itself is a broad one but it carries no flood to the sea except during monsoon hours. And the sea has de-sexed the river. For under the swell of tidal action there is a perpetual flow at the bridge of clear, blue, sparkling sea-water. Standing in the middle of the arching bridge and leaning lightly on the massive parapet wall, you gain such a view of land and sea, and the glory of the sun, that it makes a lasting impression on you.

This magnificent bridge leads you with an arching curve to the east to the gardens of the Theosophical Society, solemn and still with an air of experiments and absorbed enquiry into the first problems of life. Everything is fresh and green,

sweet and fragrant, and even the breeze that roams from sea to land seems to feel the calm of the place.

The guest house at Adyar by the side of the famous banyan tree, is indeed a thing of beauty. Man and Nature have both striven in comradeship to make the spot idyllic. The eternal murmur of the sea comes home as the lispings of a child that calls for its mother. Adyar echoes to the murmur of the sea in rolling eddies that go winding up the river.

Little birds sing the music in the air, little birds that are too numerous and fly nameless in a tropical country. Oblivious of the sweated dust of the roads and the hard work of the stone-breaker, a stray pleasure-canoe of a white man, proud and trim, goes up and down the river, with its little sails of pure white shining over the blue water like a summer cloud in the sky. There is a touch of alien triumph in the victorious glide of the decked wood on water.

It was the same evening and the same hour as at Akkur. Five minutes past four which sent No. 9 puffing and rattling, and sounding the whistle that was the roll-call and the speeding time for the toddy-shop at Akkur.

The guest house at Adyar in the glory of the evening sun, stood like a virgin who had stepped out of her sylvan shade, for a short walk.

Rajeswari Bai was pacing up and down the verandah of the guest house in a restless mood. She seemed the very soul of the guest house, in the marble beauty of her virgin looks. She was the arrival for the day ; Rajeswari Bai, a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, the greatest living man, and a friend and admirer of Dr. Annie Besant, the greatest living woman.

Rajeswari Bai was looking up and down the undulating road which crept on winding like the bed of a dry river till it lost itself in the dense foliage of cocoanut trees. The traffic on the main road lay two furlongs off and a thin hum had settled on the top of the banyan tree. Every hoot of a car came shrill, piercing the thin hum of traffic and sent a strange thrill through Rajeswari's queenly frame of body and of mind. From the top floor of the guest-house, the Adyar Bridge was a thing of spanned beauty and measured splendour. The massiveness mellowed into gracious looks of strength and liquid beauty from the just distance of the guest house.

Stealing his steps like a cat that goes to its

cheese or a spider that leaps on to the fly, Rangaswami came running along the foot-path by the side of the river, ran up the staircase, and from behind, gently patted Rajeswari on her shoulders, soft as new fallen snow. She was lost in a twilight dream of dances, and a reverie of half expectations. She just gave a start—another in her place would have screamed for help.

“For a palpitating heart, dear Ranga, this back-patting is no cure. But you are as foolish as ever. And a year of critical change for all has wrought no change in you.” Rajeswari chided him in the mixed voice of love and anger.

“Dear Rajee, I was only planning a pleasant surprise.”

“Your head clerk, I suppose, was asked to draft the plan with a note?”

“Dear Rajee, don’t be squeamish after a year’s long separation—just for the pleasure of cracking jokes and hurting the tender thoughts of love. Remember your words when we last parted at the Victoria Terminus—keen words that gave me joy for a year and kept me up in the wretched official world that has become my lot, alas!”

“What, already discontented—with five hundred a month, and pomp and power! Why, you remember

your own statistics in London, which you used so well at every meeting. The average earning power of an Indian is a penny a day. ”

“ Well, I know better now. I then talked from figures; now I can talk from life; that our masses are the poorest and the most ignorant of such lots in the world. But I fear their remedies are in their own hands. Government can do but little. ”

“ How well you have caught the official slang in a year! ”

“ Rajee, I came here to talk of finer things than the lot of the poor! ”

“ But is there anything finer? ”

“ Yes, Rajee. ”

She blushed a little but it was more the flush of anger that reddened her face than thoughts of love.

“ In every way, what is life worth for me even with two thousand a day without you, dear Rajee. You must decide now. All the problems that racked our brains at Oxford for three years and more for our country’s weal, we could best solve together now in a practical way. Work is everything. Talk, schemes and wise words are of no use now and the country’s call is for deeds, direct action at the very base of life, the village. ”

"Yes, quite so, but I view it in another way. Only, work outside the Government ranks where the chief duty is now to put patriots in jail."

"Nothing can and will be done effectively without the aid of Government, but frothy talk and foaming speeches. I've seen it all, though before I often thought like you. It's impossible. Private effort will prove vain like the dash of the raging sea against the ageless but smiling rocks. In any event, whatever we decide upon, let us decide it together when we begin our wedded life."

Rajeswari vigorously pouted her lips, and that made her more beautiful.

"Rajee, you must decide now. A life gifted like yours is not meant to sail alone—the most beautiful ship ever built, why should it lie idle in the dock for ever waiting for an impossible cargo of diamonds?"

"Then you ask her to carry a cargo of coal?" Rajeswari shot an arrow.

It was a biting cut, for it contained a veiled allusion to Rangan's swarthy complexion. Rangan took such things always very pleasantly as a kind of penalty for his inordinate fondness for metaphors and similes that came tumbling down like pebbles in a mountain spate.

He ventured a belated reply, "Yes, so that the whole world may not lack warmth and light."

Rangan had excellent powers of recuperation. Otherwise, how could a poor and homeless lad become an I. C. S., and the Assistant Collector, at Guntur, at the age of twenty-five.

Rangan passed a moment surveying the scene around him.

"This verandah seems a luckless place to continue afresh in India the true love between us begun on the free soil of England. Look yonder, Rajee, the banyan tree seems to wait, praying for a kiss of your feet with its wind-swept branches bowing low to the ground. Let us go to its inviting shade of green, and spell the joy of minutes, of fleeting seconds, and pour into each other's the cellared wine of a year's joy."

(2)

"Ranga, life is more serious than you and I thought while at Oxford. The call of the country has, for me at any rate, silenced the call of home and love, of leisured, rich, idle and contemplative life."

Rangan reared himself a little, like a serpent, startled at the strange sincerity in her voice and the warm patriotic glow in her eyes. The Assis-

tant Collector, who sent to prison at Guntur so many patriots a day, knew how to read the whole history of a year in a word and a look.

Rajeswari continued craning her neck loftily, "The world is in a ferment, though you now see it not. We are breaking everything old that we may build something new on a higher valley of life. Our eyes glued to the text-books and the sports of boys saw it not at Oxford. It's clear to me even in these five minutes that your one year of office has made you worse. It's a sin for an Indian to toil at the desk in these critical days when the remaking of a new India is going on before our very eyes under the glorious leadership of the greatest living man of the world. Shall our hands remain idle?"

• "Dear Rajee, I've called you here by wire just to let you know what a great fight I'm making for my country from within. Fight the King from within—that is one way of doing things. I was prepared for the other and seemingly more patriotic work. But God has willed it for me in His own way. Courage and patriotism, if one has it deep down his heart, is never lost, by change of place or habits. Like complexion, Rajee, it is an inheritance with the flesh. It rolls in the blood.

I shall tell you the inward story of my year's life as a Civilian. You know that Guntur is in the thick of the fight. The poor fellows at the top seem to think that the great nationalistic movement could be put down with a few *lathi* charges and bullet shots. I wrote note after note, which swelled into essays, to the Member in charge who, I dare say, if he could understand King's English should have had a better sense of and sight into things. All through I carried on in my own way, though the police chiefs were the real trouble as they never obey our orders. Yet from this morning talk with my chief I understand things are brightening up, and soon there will be a change of policy and of heart, though as a penalty for my patriotic attitude I'm now transferred to the quieter Tanjore. That is the price I have paid. But it matters not for me. Dear Rajee, is this not also patriotic work? I challenge."

Rajeswari was silent for a few minutes as if in deep reflection.

"I did my work so well and independently that I am now under orders of transfer to Tanjore, a quieter place and my own district. I've still a week of joining time. That is why I telegraphed you. In this hour, your presence is the best solace

for me. Pray, give me your final approval. I knew you would question me like this. I knew you were taking a heroic part in the Bombay struggle. I know you are noted by the Government of India. Already telegraphic instructions have been received to watch your movements lest you disturb the quiet of this Province."

"Yes, Ranga, my love for you has sent me to the South. I have chosen to work here with you or against you, as it pleases God. Things are deeper than what you say they are. Your arguments are mere quibbles of a clever speaker. The true work of a patriot lies now outside the Government ranks. It might have been done through Government agencies some fifty years ago. Nobody did it then and now it is all too late even for the best men. The social order is crying and breaking for a change. No might on earth can stop it for an hour."

Rajeswari in the excess of emotion waved her hands in the air, which frightened two sparrows making love to each other on the lofty branch of the big banyan tree.

"The centre has shifted from there. Now we must work only from without. If you care to follow me through thick and thin and share with

me in the real fight, and sacrifice your five hundred—I'm still yours, dear Ranga."

Taking a deep breath she continued, "Bombay has done, no doubt, some brave and wonderful things these three months and more. But it's all the first scene of the first act of the great five-act drama. I've come all the way a thousand miles, not to woo and wed and make merry, but to convert you to the larger cause of love for our Mother, the cause of our country. You will gain me and your country if you lose the I. C. S. Resign your job and join the Congress ranks, and work for the masses. If only you have seen the invisible tears of sorrow running down their pale cheeks! Brave imprisonment and *lathi* charges and carry the flag of our country to undreamt-of heights of honour—then this frail hand and body is yours for ever—so that the children sprung of our loins may see the light of day in a free country."

Quick of mind, Rangan saw the tidal wave of nationalism flooding the beautiful river winding higher and higher up. Rajee seemed but a fair flower dancing like foam on the lips of the whirling eddy that rolled along the swift current of the sea, higher and higher up the Adyar river.

"Dear Rajee, the only daughter of a millionaire

and the darling of an ancient house, I would plead,—when and why this strange anguish of a fanatic's soul for you? Pity for the poor whom no amount of tears can make clean, rich, or better but their own unremitting, proud self-help, and effort and manly toil! Nature has meant your queenly beauty and royal looks for palace halls and not for prison cells. I know from my official knowledge of things what an awful fate and dire suffering awaits the patriot in this country, and it's no joke to cut the tentacles of this octopus of this British lion—I mean its manes."

Rangan breathed a minute of pause just to recover himself from the sunstroke of his own wild mixed metaphors.

"Again, Rajee, you can't change a nation at one impetuous stroke of the pen in a day, as you and all the Congress people want to do. I'd argue like this, but I know it is of no avail in your present frame of mind. I may as well bid the sea not to rush up the Adyar river and fill its fair-fresh water banks with the bitter, salt sea-flood. The tide of nationalism is up, and women once caught in its swirl are no good arguing with."

But Rajeswari looked amazed at the tone of Rangan's speech. She couldn't help asking him

"But whence this profound change, Ranga? All your socialistic tenets that made me your slave and co-worker on a hundred platforms in London, where are they now?—wiped off in the flood of a safe five hundred a month, and the pomp and power of office? You were once the most fervid of socialistic orators, and it was this verbal charm that gave your being a tense attraction. Why this quick change?"

"No change, dear, in the root convictions of my life, nor in my pity for the poor of whom I'm still one. My position might have sobered me. For I see now clearly that life is so uneven and so numerous. Every step you take to save or lift another is but a step by which you crush some other, though it be very unwittingly. Like rain on rock, it takes ages to polish a social order of peace and plenty to all, though it takes but three hours to blow the marble off to pieces. Only now I see all the sides of life, and see better to carry to a triumphant close the ideas of our younger days. Give me a week, dear Rajee, you will know me better and judge me more charitably."

But Rajeswari was in a deep mood of contemplation.

In a throbbing voice Rangan said, with eyelids glued to eyes, "My life is void, my work is

void, my heart is void, without you, Rajee. Everything about me is but a heap of ashes without the spark of your breath. Promise me your love and let us both work together with courage and patience, as we planned at Oxford so often in dreamy hours of joy. Let us work all the hours from day to day, and clear the filth of ages, giving the mute peasants a voice to speak with, a home to live in, and a zest in life they have never known, and an ever-widening vision of life and a cycle of joy. Only a Collector can do it all, if he but wishes. A clouded sky must prelude rains, but it is not every cloud that rains. Dear Rajee, our words are rich in wisdom but we are poor in minting them into deeds of love and virtue. Let us do it in a humble way. And a collectorship is just the thing; a little kingship, wisely rendered, means the making of the beautiful lives of many millions. That is the great example to the world I mean. Give me a week, Rajee. You'll know me better and judge me more charitably."

Rajeswari seemed to nod assent.

"I've a week's joining time—."

Rajeswari interrupted, "All that you say, Ranga is good when Swaraj is won and freedom for all is gained. You can never work for the poor, till the

whole system is changed. For, all the work in every way and everywhere, even selfless work, goes now so as to feed only the few rich. Everything is so planned and marked and channelled up. We must break these small, diverting, sinful, tragic bunds, and cut a new way for the equal flow of all life. We must so order the new plan that God's water flows equally to all the heads and fields. That is the real meaning of all this unrest, and the plan and purpose of these renascent times. You must play a part therein, Ranga, if you want me and my love. I've made up my mind. I'm going to work in the very district to which you now go as Collector. Let the very hand which should tie the marital knot sentence me to prison—it is a rare pleasure, if such be God's will. But as you say, let us spend a week together and see the true way to work together. I agree."

"I've yet a week's joining time." The official slang gripped Rangan powerfully. "Rajee, let us go together to Tranquebar, the Queen of the Coromandel Coast. It is meet place for a fairy like you from the West. It's a beautiful spot for rest and thought."

Rajeswari nodded assent.

"Let us meet to-night at the Egmore Railway

Station at 8. The Boat Mail leaves at 8-30. I shall be waiting for you at the bottom step even from 7-45."

"Yes, I shall be there positively by 8."

Rangan shot a loving, lingering glance. And Rajee's eyes lingered for a while on Rangan's. A strange glow of pain quaked them. But liquid peace and strength shone through the tears that gathered therein—like dew-drops on lotus-buds.

CHAPTER III

THE TODDY-SHOP AT AKKUR

(1)

"Kanda, why are you so late to-day," shouted in one voice Nandan, Mookkan and Katteri, Irullan, Karuppan and Irullappan; and a straggling crowd of two dozen in different levels of drunkenness. They seemed to take more joy in Kandan's presence than even in the sweet drink. For, Kandan was their voice, the hero and saint of the place, who had come all the way from across the blue seas to reform them and to speak to them a gentle word of cheer.

Even a drunkard has an illicit liking for a teetotaler.

Kandan was in an unusually ruminating mood. Yes, there was a saintliness about him. He walked into the toddy-shop with a quick and calm gesture instinctively commanding silence.

"Kanda, what's the matter with you to-day? We thought nothing ever goes wrong with you, and you

are a jolly, good fellow, ever smiling," Nallan asked with some deference. Even in putting this question he was a little more audacious than usual, for he had already finished three pots, and his eyes were rolling merry twinkles of laughter, and his speech changing to a child-like lisp of unuttered joy. He took but a sip from the fourth pot, and flung it in high disdain as a mark of honor and sacrifice at Kandan's arrival. The unlucky pot rolled on, rolling and kneeling all the sandy way till it got shelter under the knotted roots of a cocoanut tree.

"Nallan, havn't you heard of the latest news of your lord?—you fine fellows with eyes and ears, but not knowing how to use them except to find your way to this toddy-shop. I feel for you, but my feeling seems to help you so little. Havn't you heard of the latest?" Kandan cried repeating himself.

Finding his audience growing a little more attentive, he continued:

"Now, Mr. Mudaliar, foiled of his attempts to crush me himself with his own men, is begging the help of the *Sircar*, the Police and the Collector, concocting wild tales to put me down. He'll find it no easy job to fight down the son of Nagappan or the spirit of freedom that is in the air of New

India. I met your Mudaliar at the station waiting for No. 9, talking nicely to the new station master, a pale, withered, lean and hungry sort of fellow but blessed, I tell you, with a glorious wife, the like of whom in womankind I have never set my eyes on—all the shores or islands of the sea—both for beauty and for majesty. There is the awe and roll of thunder in her looks and the gleam of lightning in her eyes; a celestial halo circles her face. Alas! only, flowers like unto this must never be plucked from their garden in Heaven and placed in the crowded market-places of earth. She is like the stars that pelt the gloom of the sky with pebbles of light.”

Kandan spoke more to himself: Kandan was stirred with the full joy of self-expression. No woman had ever moved him more to a selfless joy at the first sight. It was like the fall of snow on Himalayan heights, a cloud-burst on a monsoon day, or the wild beauty of a rushing river that breaks into a hundred cascades at some fateful turn of its young and intrepid life, only to flow again as a gentle river.

“Mr. Mudaliar, I saw it, was feeling a strange rebellion of the flesh when he rolled his heavy eyes all around the railway track, timid yet wanton,

and rested them for a while at the station master's hut in which the lady was moving about, filling the window space with the glory of the morning sun. But, alas, Akkur, the deserted place of ancient Chola kings, I fear, will very soon send a tragic note of a shrill cry."

Kandan paused a moment thinking of his own wasted eloquence over these drunken fellows, cleared his throat and mind, and began again:

"Mr. Mudaliar shot a fiery look of scorn at me. I didn't return it but answered it with a smile. Nallan, my orchard home at Durban still waits for me with a ready welcome. It's for your sake, to work in my mother country, I came to this land a year ago. I find life here, mean, dirty and wretched beyond measure of words. In spite of all my solemn cries and active work, you haven't improved a jot. Every evening, I spend with you, and for a moment you seem to make up your mind that this shall be the last day of drink for you—only to break it the next evening."

Now Nandan, Mookkan and Katteri, Irullan, Karuppan and Irullappan slowly gathered round Kandan. Kandan drew a deep breath and continued in a changed tone after a slight pause.

"Now is the time for you, O Nanda, Irulla and

Nalla, to change and make men of yourselves. Refuse to drink. Let the shop be closed down for ever of its own accord. Let Akkur be free once again of a toddy-shop. Refuse to work but for manly wages, give up this drink, and try to lead better lives every hour of the day. Mine has been so far a thankless task and all the money I've given you for useful work has but come back stealthily into this toddy-shop. Nalla, I know you are both good and courageous. You are a born leader of men and the uncrowned king of Akkur. They may not listen to my voice. But these brave fellows you can lead to victory and set the example of a new life in the Tamil land. But the curse of drink is making you common clay with them, and cools your fire for the righteous things of life."

Kandan rose from his seat, and waving his hands said:

"Nalla, I feel in the air the rhythmic song of a changing order of life. Don't you hear even a whisper of it? Awake, arise, now or never."

Kandan spoke with unusual vigor. His soliloquy was more for the joy of self-expression in a fervent mood. Fears of patriotic pity at the fallen ways of his own men glued his eyes and closed them for the

moment to the sad scenes of drink and revelry before him.

Nallan was touched. He stood up and made a solemn promise that he would become a reformed man from next morning.

"But, Kanda, no doubt," Nallan began in a changed voice, "You too are rich and powerful in your own land of Natal. But your strength is but a weed's strength against Mr. Mudaliar's, who is in his own element here like a crocodile in water. He is the chief man of the Taluq and the whole Government is his."

"But, Nallan, you miss my purpose. You leave Mr. Mudaliar to his own ways. We'll put our houses in order, cleanse ourselves and make that a pretty example to all. Try and see, how much courage and sacrifice can do for ourselves and our fellowmen. True sacrifice blesseth him that gives and him that takes. We'll never think or do evil to another. The great misery of life all around us here must disappear in another year. Or else my vow is broken, and I must return to some sea-girt, lonely island, a broken-hearted man bleaching in the sun."

Nallan replied in a low and husky voice, moved by the emot on of Kandan, "Humble folk can never

correct themselves or lead the way. The big men must do it. And you know that Mr. Mudaliar leads such an awful life of waste. He is barely twenty-three and unmarried, and has wasted life at its most precious period. His aged mother weeps in vain. His *pannaials* and agents are in arrears of wages now for several months; good work is not rewarded but bad counsel fed with royal bounty. And the greedy official world, from a petty peon to the Collector, eats his salt in ample measure and pats him on the back the wrong way. Already there's great discontent among these fellows. It would soon break into crime and arson. Hayricks and grain-heaps high as hillocks may burn to ashes." Nandan, Mookkan and Katteri, Irullan, Karuppan and Irullappan began to cry "hurrah" shouting with the joy of approaching plunder. Katteri waved his long hands in support of the proposition lifting them towards the sky.

Kandan, who listened to the whole speech very patiently, said in a very calm voice: "That would be the wrong way of doing it, Nalla. It w'd profit neither, but only waste your own wealth, the food of the people."

"But that's the only way known to us, poor,

ignorant, toiling folk. Ask these fellows, if you please."

"Hip, hip, hurrah!" shouted all in one voice, Nandan, Mookkan and Katteri, Irullan, Karuppan and Irullappan. "We'll do it to-day; master is away." Everyone raised his hands as if ready to act at once and cried, "We'll do it to-day, master is away."

"No, no, Nalla, that's simply exciting these poor fellows to their own ruin. Peace begets peace; war begets war."

"Look yonder by the mango tree, Karian is coming. He is the spy set on you by Mr. Mudaliar to plot your ruin," Nallan shouted.

Karian was seen coming slowly with measured, strident steps and extra joy in his looks. Kandan watched him with intent care and received him with a sweet smile and open arms.

"Karia, you'll live a hundred years," cried Irullappan whose deep malice, drink only made more palpable. He, who passed this benediction on Karian, took always a beneficent interest in promoting the feud between Kandan and Karian.

"Yes, I knew from your looks that you were talking of me—and talking ill of me. What else could it be when my cousin, Kandan, is here stir-

ring gentleness to revolt, and good work to destruction, always letting a spark of fire on dried leaves and twigs? Yes, dry people are prone to mischief and high treason to their own virtues. That's why I've always commended him to a drink to make a man of him, that he may see the light of life clearly, even as we see it through this vision of glory." Karian pointed out with pride a potfull of the foaming white juice, and thought of the contents in his hand with the prospective pleasure of annexation. Karian spoke with a rare moderation and a suppressed glee in his voice.

"What is the good luck for the day that makes you so eloquent, Karia?" asked Nallan.

Karian flung open his palm, and five silver rupees shone with amazing lustre. He turned with an inward chuckle towards Kandan.

Kandan and Karian were first cousins. Their fathers were brothers of an undivided Hindu joint family. Their ancestral home was at Tillayadi, an enterprising village with a thousand houses. Karian's father was the elder of the two and ruled the family with an iron hand. He had seen better days under the Danish Government. In fact, he had led in his younger days a faction so successfully that the Danish Governor at Tranquebar was

obliged to appoint him the chief magistrate of the place. The iron rule of the elder brother chafed the free and roaming spirit of the younger, Kandan's father, Nagappan, who fled to Natal one day when the rebellious mood was high. He had then hardly completed twenty-four. But that age was always reckoned as the critical year for a youth in Nagappan's family when fortune was made or marred.

Nagappan's subsequent career in Natal is a matter of history. He was the first lieutenant of Mahatma Gandhi and the very man who played a decisive part in the shaping of this great saint into an astute politician.

So Kandan came of a proud pedigree, and public work was in his blood as a matter of imperishable inheritance.

And the age of twenty-four proved really critical to Kandan as well. He was a student at Oxford, and passed brilliantly the I.C.S. examination. He met with a cruel fate in the very hour of victory in an affair of the heart. Disappointed love in the pregnant hour of change destroyed the self and changed into the higher love for all beings. Kandan voluntarily threw up the assured and kingly career of an Indian Civil Servant at the probation period. He finally decided not to settle down in Natal but in

his own Motherland and do some public work. Therefore, he came over to India, to his own village of Tillayadi. His arrival synchronised with the construction of a railway track to his own place and it seemed to him of happy augury. Kandan learnt that Karian was the sole surviving member of his family and of the low state to which it had fallen.

As for Karian, with the transfer of the Government from the Danish to the British, Karian's father rapidly declined in influence and wealth, in position and emoluments. He died a broken-hearted man leaving behind him for Karian only a few acres of sand-dunes, wind-swept and ever-dry.

The first act of Karian was to sell away these precious three acres of sand-dunes, and look about for an investment which gave him some initiative and scope for his strength and industry. Fortunately the new railway line from Mayavaram to Tranquebar was being laid and it was greatly exercising the mind of the rustic people. Karian tried his fortune as an earth-work contractor with the modest capital of five hundred rupees, his all.

The one conspicuous quality of the Kandan-Karian family was a chronic inability to adjust themselves to changing situations. Karian did his

contract work with great uprightness but lost his all in the job, because he failed to please the army of officials that hung on to him like dog-flies over the honey comb.

But Karian remained undaunted. He took a vow before his family Goddess Brihannayaki at Tillayadi and the famous Mariamman at Olugumangalam that he would somehow make good his money from this very railway line. He had enough following of *budmashes* in his own village to hold up a night train and smash the coaches for the sheer joy of it, and pilfer the passengers for what they were worth. But this seemed, in the broad daylight of the twentieth century, even to Karian in his splendid youth a little ungainly and antiquated affair.

Karian could get only the job of a porter-pointsman at Akkur, which on first thoughts he was for declining as quite menial. He had even decided to sail away to Natal like his revered uncle. But a bird in hand was worth two in the bush—somebody said—and Karian learnt at least so much out of his railway contract. And he was encouraged that the portership, though menial and degrading, had its own scheduled perquisites and possibilities. And true to his vow he began to

milk money from every rustic with a seeming load of excess luggage. Karian was an expert at weighing and the poor folk got alarmed at the mere sight of the weighing machine with its dacoit 'arm' projecting from its very mouth, and pointing accusingly at every passer-by.

Kandan strove his best to be on very friendly terms with Karian, and in fact viewed him as a possible helpful collaborator in his schemes of national uplift and amelioration. Kandan admired the dash and energy, the courage and quickness, and the wonderful popularity of Karian. But Karian met him like brushwood meeting fire. He felt keenly his low position in life and his agnatic blood boiled over with jealousy.

Kandan however never failed in his efforts, when the chances came, to make up with Karian, especially as he felt that he was the sole surviving member of his family, and that his joys and sorrows should but rightly be shared with him. He offered him his love, his money, his person and everything, to please Karian and win him over for ever. But Karian found his pride and poverty so far the chief obstacles in the way of a very cousinly understanding and a united life.

But on this occasion Karian seemed to be in a

very pleasant humour. Kandan summoned up his very best and stretched out his right hand to Karian. This offer of fellowship he implemented with appropriate looks and gestures.

Karian's triumphal income of five rupees that day really bridged the agnatic gulf and decided the issue.

"Yes, Kanda, made up. Dear cousin, will you celebrate this occasion with a sip of this sweet drink of the gods? Taste it but once, you would leave off preaching against this nectar! And we could be friends and cousins for ever."

Kandan smiled one of his most gracious and disarming smiles, the smile of a child pure and innocent, and kept silent, lest words uttered at random should spoil the peace-effects.

Karian opened his palm, and five rupees of shining silver beamed. Everyone cried, "hurrah." He flung the rupees to the salesman and exclaimed, "Let us celebrate the occasion with a free drink to all our friends and fellows."

There was an hour of revelry in the toddy-shop on an unprecedented scale.

Kandan gently hinted to Karian that it was perhaps time to go home for meals and be ready to receive No. 13 from Tranquebar.

Kandan and Karian soon parted after a fond fraternal embrace, vowing eternal loyalty to each other in the name of their great-grandfather.

But in the toddy-shop the spirit ran very high as soon as the moral check of Kandan's presence was removed. There was much merry singing and laughing, screaming and shouting, in as many grades of intoxication as the purse of each and the common gift of Karian would permit. Even the placid tank seemed to share in it, with kindly ripples breaking at the very feet of these drunken men. In the general uproar of the toddy-shop Katteri's voice was heard the loudest, urging the men to deeds of valour and virtue that very night.

Nandan and Mookkan, Irullan, Karuppan and Irullappan shouted approval.

Five rupees' worth of free drink is a windfall of the first magnitude to these poor tillers of the soil. The toddy-shop wore the look of festal gaiety of Indra's own palace hall of pleasure in Heaven.

CHAPTER IV

FIRST CLASS FOR LUGGAGE AND THIRD CLASS FOR MEN

(1)

True to his word, Rangan arrived at the Egmore station in a high grade Buick Taxi. He had already booked in the morning his passage to Tranquebar taking a First Class ticket. In a fit of modesty he gave his name as plain "R. S. Ranga-swami" on the reservation card. He purposely withheld the magic letters "I. C. S." as he had a feeling that without the trappings of office his personality would not come up to the ordinary requirements of the designation. He now travelled alone even without a *chokra*, for the worship of Rajee must be done with undivided devotion.

But Rangan was not totally devoid of personality. True, he had not a fine physical presence, a fair complexion and a symmetric and stately build. But he had a kind of intellectual presence whose magnetism was felt by those who could respond to

it, a very cultured few. That was the chief quality that attracted Rajeswari to Rangan even in a foreign land. It was as a socialistic preacher that Rangan found his full stature, and his deep study of socialism acted also as a preliminary incentive to a keener study of the I. C. S. curricula. For it helped him to plumb in some measure the degrading depths of human misery. Hence it was no wonder that he had the magic, suffusing glow of sincerity which all born orators develop at the tip of their tongue like the fireless light the glow-worm does at the tail.

Otherwise Rangan looked a very common man, dark in complexion, awkward and shuffling in gait, tall and thin, with an ungainly but distinguished countenance. But it was his voice that had the redeeming gift. Its timbre was sweet and attractive. It had a converting touch. But these are qualities not felt at the first sight but only in the intimacies of conversation. So Rangan, now no more an orator but an administrative head bedecked in red tape and flag, felt the need, to assert and proclaim his dignity, of belted peons and the flowing toga robes of attendants who went about in front fussing and hissing. For Rajeswari Bai's sake he hurried to Madras all alone, even without a cook.

The moment Rangan reached the second-class portico and touched the flight of steps, he was besieged by a ragged army of porters. He had developed recently a considerable habit for heavy luggage, though in his student days he was famous for travelling light—in fact except for the *dhoti* he wore, he had nothing surplus to carry home after the vacation. The Egmore third-class entrance was full of such vivid memories for him. But he quickly turned away from this plebeian scene of his earlier years of struggle. Of course the ragged army of porters were unaware of the august presence of the Assistant Collector.

Rangan, who knew very well how to organise and present the case of a Trade Union of porters if the call came, knew nothing of the highly skilled and diplomatic negotiations required to settle a reasonable charge for his luggage with these hungry men. He stood still, besieged by the clamours of the army. He had other matters of importance weighing on his mind. Meanwhile for every little bag, like ants from an ant-hill, came running, in crowded confusion, porters, black and fair, young and old, moustached and clean-shaven. Every one took

hold of an article unceremoniously and claimed special appointment, some by virtue of gesture, some by a wink of the master's eye, and some, more audacious than the rest, by express call by name.

Rangan found it impossible to quell this riot of co-operation and resigned himself to his fate which would after all mean but a rupee more for these poor fellows. Were not his early socialistic doctrines worth that much at least at this critical hour ?

Porters are generally a shrewd lot, taught in the rough school of railway station life with its fine variety of experience, from generosity to meanness, from sterling honesty to vile trickery. They could easily weigh a man's heart and ascertain his intentions quicker and more accurately than the weighing machine could do his luggage. They found out his name and class ; he had already been spotted in the morning as a possible prey and his pedigree traced sufficient for their purposes, except for the I.C.S. for which there was no warrant about him. His luggage safely found its way to the first-class berth assigned to him. But Rangan's transit seemed less easy.

(2)

Rangan was faced with a real problem. Rajeswari Bai was travelling and he must find for her a

berth along with him. He regretted that he had not used in the morning the magic letters "I.C.S." Now to declare to the railway menials that he was an I.C.S. just to secure another berth was to court an enquiry and cheapen the prestige of his own peerless Service.

Then the Asst. Collector in mufti approached the ticket-collector on duty at the entrance to the platform, who stood at ease with a serenity and sourness patented only in railway service, and asked him very gently, "May I see the station master?"

"No, you can't see him," came the abrupt reply like a shot from a toy air-gun.

"Can't?"

"Can't. I say you can't. He's very busy."

"May I go in?"

"Yes, if you have a platform ticket—one anna please, put a nickel-piece in the slot and pull out a ticket this way." The ticket-collector directed the Assistant Collector as to how to put a penny in the slot, and learn the intricacies of the latest improvement.

Rangan searched his pocket for a nickel piece but found only a four-anna silver bit. "I haven't a nickel piece, collector. But here's a four-anna bit, silver. Please have't."

Rangan slipped the coin with a faint smile and a gentle finger tip. The ticket-collector understood the kindness, and took the silver piece stealing a glance all over. It was the revealing, piteous glance of the under-dog whom civilisation sweats so that the lords of the earth may fly like angels at forty miles an hour. The under-dog licks the fleshless bone and its tail wags with the joy that an unkind but resurgent memory kindles. The ticket-collector became gracious all at once.

"Very well, sir, please come in. I'm at your service. The station master is a very big man. You can't easily get at him. I'll do my best to put you on the way. Haven't you heard of the proverb, sir, the *karnam* can do more than the Collector?"

"Thanks, what's your name—and pay, ticket-collector?"

"My name is Rangaswami and friends call me Rangan. And my pay is twenty-five rupees, sir, and I'm a family man with five daughters and three sons, and it's very hard work here, sir, as you know."

"Yes, indeed, I quite see your point. Just help me a little. I've taken a first class to Tranquebar by the Boat Mail."

"First class to Tranquebar!—then why a platform ticket, sir? I'm so sorry—."

"It doesn't matter at all, a few annas, ticket-collector. I want another berth in the same cabin. A lady is now travelling with me, and I must find her a seat somehow. Would you kindly arrange?" Rangan's voice grew tender like that of a cooing dove.

"I'm glad you have come a little early. I'll do my best and let you know in five minutes."

Rangan, the Assistant Collector, slipped a rupee into the spacious hands of the ticket-collector whose grateful fingers closed in joy on the rupee with a falcon's speed. The ill-pared nails scratched on the thin skin of the true Collector, a trail of comradeship in the hour of need and service, and established a real union of the hearts between the two collectors.

The news spread everywhere kindling to activity the under-dogs of a railway station even as a drop of honey sets in motion a crowd of ants and flies.

The Boat Mail has always a crowded traffic. There was no extra first-class berth available that night to manipulate easily. But soon it was found that a fat Chetti, a banker, was travelling first in the same cabin. He belonged to a class of people

who were always easy material to negotiate with in matters where vague, fundamental rights that could not be reduced to money value were concerned. It was at once decided, of course *ex parte*, by the menial railway gods that he should either travel second class by the Boat Mail or first class by the next train which left an hour later. The Chetti gladly acquiesced in this arrangement, and forgot the pain of travel in the reverie of accumulating interest in three countries and thirty districts.

For, money-lenders are usually the meekest in the world though they are the most courageous in matters calling for affidavits. For usury kills the red corpuscles in the blood, though it increases the deposit of fat very near the heart. If the good luck of a parasite is easy and rich food, it is paid for by the total destruction of the first quality of life, courage.

The Chetti who arrived clear half an hour earlier than Rangan was solemnly appraised of the difficulties in the way of his travelling first class, as a *dorai* wanted to travel in the same cabin with a lady. The final choice was put before him: the second class or the next train?

The Chetti readily consented, saying humbly, "First or second is the same to me, sir. I buy first

for the sake of prestige—a little place in any corner of the Boat Mail, I pray, will do for me. I've to attend to-morrow my grand-daughter's marriage in time, and the second train goes too late for the occasion."

(3)

Rangan was overjoyed with the return for his rupee. Happy and fluttering, everything ready, he was waiting eagerly at the portico, craning his neck and drying his eyes to sight Rajeswari Bai. He fancied he was already rolling at forty miles an hour in the luxurious first-class cabin of the Boat Mail with Rajee by his side. Meanwhile every hooting car that came grinding at the foot of the flight of steps raised his hopes. Time fled painfully, and his eyes dimmed with disappointment. Still only fifteen minutes left! Rajee was not the lady to break her word or change her mind!

He thought he heard her voice emerging from the crashing din and hellish noise at the entrance to the third-class gate, where a raging crowd was fighting for every inch of standing space as if in a battle-field of trench warfare. He quickly ran up to her: Yes, it was Rajeswari herself.

Rajeswari Bai came by bus which ran late as it

burst its tyre on the way near the Royapettah hospital, while it leisurely canvassed for custom calling every passer-by. On her arrival, even the few things she carried, a little bag and a small bed, were annexed without her consent and without any ceremony by a crowd of porters who came yelling like wolves. They now quarrelled among themselves as to who first touched the luggage, and gained the right to carry. It is always a difficult point which even the International Court of Justice at Geneva or The Hague cannot decide after all the evidence in the case. For hungry hands fly to their food at the same velocity.

Rangan was delighted. "That's not the way, Rajee. It is the wretched third-class entrance, the same as ever, a little hell on earth in India. Here it is—our way to the first-class entrance. I've booked first for both of us."

The Assistant Collector turned a little with an air of authority towards the shouting, unruly porters who had not yet decided the subtle question of who touched first. "I'll cane you, rascals, you feller there, take up the things," and Rangan pointed to a broad-shouldered Atlas who had just come to see what the matter was. The last called was the first chosen.

"No, no, Ranga, I carry my own things,—there is not much. Besides I'm travelling third." There was decision in her voice and eyes.

"Travelling third, hell—it is here, Rajee. It is not England, Rajee, it is hell; slime, spit and filth. Travelling third, you who filled the P. and O boat with your royal luggage and trunks, and travelled first-class in a first-class ocean-liner, to travel third in the S.I.R. ! Are you mad, Rajee ? You'll suffocate yourself. I have booked first-class for both of us, a single cabin, and it is ready and waiting for you."

Rangan entreated her in vain. Rajeswari did not move an inch. "I'm travelling third, no doubt about it. If you want my company, run up and take two third-class tickets to Tranquebar."

Rajeswari stood firm and calm, shining like the moon through the small openings in a dark cloud.

(4)

But getting a third-class ticket at Egmore station is an acrobatic feat which some enterprising firm may well roll into a motion picture for the joy of the world, of course, after paying for their film rights to the South Indian Railway. Rangan knew

it, and remembered the agility of his younger days to glide like an eel through sweating masses of men.

Just in front of the third-class booking-office window stands a stately revolving iron cage six feet high and divided into four folds. One should pass through this cage to secure a ticket.

There was already a heaving, raging, cursing, sweating crowd of old and young, struggling for their way to the sacred cage that issued the pass to Heaven. The lord of tickets sat on the other side careless of the woes of mankind—amidst heaps of silver and copper pieces thrown in hollow discs, mounding up like a pyramid. He seemed a veteran of seventy summers, and his *namam* was faint, being wet with the oiled perspiration of ages. He had long ago ceased to wipe off this running brook as it proved to be a perennial stream. He was sick of the familiar, toiling crowd before him, and recently he had calamities of his own. His daughter was widowed, and he applied for leave which could not be granted as no relieving hand suitable to such a big station as Egmore was available. Just the previous night in the Boat Mail issue he had lost one rupee, eight annas and three pies. The thought of the loss still racked him, for it meant to his family the loss of so many measures of oil.

The crowd in the cage was getting thicker, and by sheer excess of weight the revolving cage refused to move. For, the booking clerk had fallen into a conversation with an old friend of his from his own village, whom he had not seen for several years. His friend had now exercised the privilege to call on him in his own sacred room and take the ticket from within, as a demonstration to the hostile and begging crowd before him of his special intimacy with the lord of tickets. He went on talking leisurely of health, wealth and weather, and making prolonged enquiries of sundry trifles at home. The booking clerk, sick of this damned work for ages with no chance of promotion, stopped his work at the dating machine, stretched his legs out, and chattered at ease.

Only five minutes more for the train to start, and the first bell rang. It was death-knell to the frightened sheep in the pen, and they redoubled their god-given bleating devices. But the lord of tickets chewed the *pan*, and rolled his tongue with the new-comer occasionally digging out a particle of nut that got in between the aged, decaying teeth.

Rangan had just arrived within the cage, and loudly protested, "What does the booking clerk do there, sleeping?"

The booking clerk crashed in reply, "Who are you, *dorai*? When did you arrive straight from London? What did you do till now; these fifty-five minutes I have been issuing tickets—sleeping?"

But Rangan's words had some effect though not immediately. For the clerk began to pull out tickets once again, and the familiar click of the dating machine carried joy to Rangan's palpitating heart and to the sweating crowd in the cage.

But with the sheer excess load of men the revolving cage refused to move, and no new-comer was willing to go out and ease the load. So one by one as soon he had taken a ticket, scaled the height and leapt out like a tiger escaping to the freedom that lay beyond.

Rangan saw the prospect with dismay. Rajeswari was standing a little away, lost in melancholy. Rangan's turn came in a couple of minutes of suffocation. He got the tickets, looked high and prayed to his family God, the saving Lord of the seven sacred hills at Tirupati, scaled the cage with trembling hands—muttered a curse on the British Raj, and leapt to the ground with no greater injury than a twisted wrist, a crushed toe, and a neck that refused to revolve its usual swing of freedom.

"Dear Rajee, look at this. You won't plead for Swaraj hereafter. Such a thing is unknown anywhere else in the civilised world. Even after years of railway service, if we can't learn even to fall in a line and form queues—we are unfit to take a single step in advance. Anyhow the booking clerk is scandalously negligent—I shall report him to the Agent as soon as I go to Tanjore. I'm glad I have had this experience to-night, though it's frightful."

Rajeswari interrupted, "Let us catch the train first—then there is plenty of time to philosophise and to think of remedies."

A little away from the horrid cage, stood a constable in khaki shorts and red turban, listless and laughing, chewing gum, *pan* and tobacco, and spitting all over the marble pavement. Occasionally he varied his ease and stopped his chatter by casting eyes on some fair passer-by. Rangan went up to the constable and complained.

"It is none of my business, sir, to form queues. This sort of thing goes on from day to day. Nobody thinks of it. Evidently you are new to this place. I've orders to catch only thieves and pick-pockets."

"The whole thing is wrong, Rajeswari. No

tinkering will cure the malady. There must be some deep inner purging. Some Mussolini or Napoleon, India needs at this critical hour. These chronic tumours can't be cured by fasting, but must be cut open and cured by a surgical knife. Mild measures are no good, sheer waste of God-given time and energy at the most critical and fruitful hour in our history."

"Let us catch the train, Ranga, this is hardly the place for preaching or for political philosophy. Let us move on quickly. There's barely a minute. Let us discuss things in the train—if we are so lucky as to catch it for all this adventure."

Rangan hurried elbowing his way through the crowd, pushing aside a few, young and old, men and women, quietly forgetting his own Sermon on the Mount.

Rajeswari Bai silently and quickly followed him, with her luggage in her own hands, wrapped in thoughts of universal gloom.

CHAPTER V

THE BOAT MAIL

While Rangan was thus performing rare feats of acrobatic skill and strength in the protection cage in front of the booking-office window before the immediate presence of Rajeswari Bai, the Ceylon Boat Mail lay on the first platform like a queen in her bridal chamber awaiting her lord. The engine was fifty yards away from the coaches, 'drinking' water with a hippopotamus grunt of satisfaction puffing smoke and emitting occasional sparks of fire to tell the star-lit sky above of a kindred power in its bosom.

The Ceylon Boat Mail is a thing of beauty, a favourite of the railway gods at Trichy. It is their darling and the one thing they care for among the thousand wheels and brakes that clatter along the two thousand miles of their railway. It had on that day a special freshness and charm. For the first and second-class coaches had been newly built and painted on a new model of comfort and colour-

effect for the ease and pleasure of those that travelled home after the weary work of years in a trying climate. And the third-class coaches on such a festive occasion received also a touch of paint and varnish in a humble way. The net result was that the Ceylon Boat Mail that day wore a queenly air of virgin beauty. And Rangan, ever keenly sensitive to all sensuous effects, would have praised the whole as the finest work of man and of British Raj in India but for the tragic story of the third-class tickets to Tranquebar.

It happened to be a Rangoon steamer day. A deck cargo of two thousand men had alighted at the harbour that morning and they were speeding home if possible, by the fastest train. So the Boat Mail carried double the human freight it was meant to carry. Every coach was a litter of boxes and beds, men, women and children huddled together.

It was only five minutes for the train to start. The station master, a stately figure who should have done justice to all the good things of this earth, emerged from his lordly seclusion and condescended to share the crowd on the platform. He cast a fleeting glance at the terrible, 'black-hole' congestion in the third-class coaches, and

sniffed contempt for the 'blackies' who all wanted to travel by the same train. The next train, which left an hour later, he was sure, would go empty. It was impossible to deal with traffic congestion in South India with people of this mentality. Passengers go like sheep the same way, the same compartment and the same train and don't even bleat.

He strolled on the platform gracefully and evenly like a God among men, and there was a hushed decorum among the menial staff of the railway. He never spoke a word to anyone till he met the Chief Police Inspector and asked him, smiling and surprised, "I'm very glad to meet you, somewhat rare nowadays. Any important work that has brought you here in the midst of a crowd? Can I be of any help to you?"

"Yes, I'm under telephonic instruction from the Commissioner of Police himself to watch two persons travelling by this train."

While Rangan was struggling in the cage to obtain a third-class ticket, a 'phone message was received at the Railway Police room of the Egmore Station.

"Hullo, is it you, Inspector, I'm the Commissioner of Police, Madras City, speaking. Urgent orders have been received to watch the movements

of Mr. R. S. Rangaswami, Assistant Collector, Guntur, now on transfer to Tanjore. He is leaving Madras by to-day's Boat Mail, and also one Rajeswari Bai, a fresh arrival from Bombay this morning. It is believed that she is also travelling by the same train. A special C. I. D. man is being sent immediately. Watch their movements and locate them in the train so that my man may easily spot them even if he arrives there just at the departure time."

The Chief Inspector had but six months to retire on his full pension. He had reached the summit of his ambition, and loved more the armchair in his office-room than the crowded platform with luggage scattered, over which he might trip and fall. But now that the Commissioner of Police had personally phoned to him he leisurely began to make enquiries and at last succeeded in identifying the luggage-heaps in the first-class cabin. He posted himself in front of it and met the station master who, after the casual enquiry, steamed off to the engine-driver, curling artistically fine rolls of smoke from the cigar in his mouth.

The porters who handled the luggage of Rangan, they too were waiting for their wages. The Police Inspector asked them in a commanding voice, "Where is your man, fellows? It can't be he is

not coming, leaving in the train so much of luggage."

"No, no, master, we saw him with our very eyes—a lean, tall, lanky common sort of fellow. Please ask the ticket-collector. He'll tell you more."

"You must be wrong, idle fellows. He can't be the man—the Assistant Collector of Guntur. The fellow you describe must be his servant who is even now perhaps waiting outside for his master. But it is only three minutes for the train to start!"

He looked at the big clock uneasily, lest some random stroke of ill-luck in work like this, outside his usual orbit, should mar the closing months of his fine police career.

Nobody came, but at the last moment a well-dressed young man ran up to the Chief Inspector hurriedly and whispered into his ears, "Thanks, it's quite all right. They are in the third class, secure. I've just put them in and found for them a seat, when they were knocking about. Only their luggage is here. It's strange—first-class tickets for one's luggage and third class for oneself! But there is plenty of time to solve the riddle in the train. Politics, ever a puzzling game! Good-bye, master. You don't remember me now, but I'm your Ponnann. I first entered service under you six

years ago at Villupuram as Head Constable, now I'm much better off—in the C.I.D., thanks. Good-bye, for the present.” •

Ponnan gracefully nodded and darted off like a terrier that was sure of its scent.

The old man, the Inspector, was wondering at the cleverness of these spy-hounds, while he himself, an old head with the red turban on soiled with the sweat and dust of thirty years, could not get even an inkling of it.

Before he could wake up from this admiring reverie and congratulate his old Constable on his alertness and good luck, the Boat Mail gently whistled and moved on quickly and silently, like a dark cloud among the stars.

CHAPTER VI

THE UNBLESSED FEMININE

(1)

The beautiful, little railway station of Akkur, new model, stands in a shady grove on an arching curve of the track, like a bird on the leafy branch of a mango tree.

The soil is fertile. All around the vegetation is rank and luxuriant though so near the sea. The cocoanut trees peer the sky. Giant banyan and stately mango cover the earth with a deep shade of solemn green. Life in Akkur seems a little idyll. The railway line gives it only a fresh and added charm, a snake-like beauty and fascination.

The little dots of fresh white buildings in the railway compound look like huts in a hermitage. The station seems a place for reverie, and no wonder even the trains move so dreamily, whistling a love tune to the bracing winds from the sea.

The sky was almost free and the crescent moon seemed to crawl and play with the wayward,

floating shapes of thin cloud. A steady breeze from the sea was blowing in, and Akkur, standing on a little eminence of its own, received it to the full.

No. 10 had already left for Tranquebar leisurely winding her way to the lull of the evening sea.

(2)

The clock struck eight. Sundaram had finished his work for the moment, and rose to go to his residential quarters near by, blithe as a bull to its feed after the day's hard work.

"I knew of this fate for me even on my wedding day," growled Sarasvati greeting her lord coming home after the day's work.

The growling voice was soft and rich but was loaded with a heavy charge of emotion. The station master, young and alert, quick of sight and sound, felt danger in the rumbling voice.

Will the peace of the night be disturbed? How best to avert a collision?

But with Sarasvati at home everything went wrong, from the broomstick to the well. For, the broomstick was rough and long, and looked more an instrument of chastising power. And the well stood in lonely splendour a little way off, and the South

Indian Railway rejoiced in using rubble everywhere within its sacred precincts, which hurt Sarasvati's tender, unprotected sole. A bruised sole puts the Feminine in revolt.

"What's the trouble, dear,—why on the very first day you are complaining?", Sundaram ventured to ask in a kindly and conciliating tone and after a long pause said, "look around, the place is magnificent. The station stands on a little eminence of its own. . . ."

"What's the trouble!" Sarasvati cut short the glowing description. "In this forest, none but bears can live. Not a soul or sound for miles around but the screech of owls, the hiss of snakes and the music of frogs. I can't live here an hour longer. Either get a transfer by wire to-night; you have been so good at telegraphing all your life for others' weal and woe, pray do it now once for yourself. Signal at once your distress to your officer, and get a transfer. Or send me home to Guntur by the night train which catches the Boat Mail. Enough have I seen of this arid life!"

Sarasvati finished decisively, and flung a silver cup to her lord, which had borne as meekly as he the several dints of her temper. Sundaram caught it nicely from the googly bowler, for he had always a

quick and trained eye for all moving things, from trains that fly at forty miles an hour to domestic furniture that spin eccentric circles.

The cup was meant for Sundaram's *sandhya* prayers which would be some atonement, Sarasvati held, for his unbrahminical service on railways. Of course the train timings did not permit their proper performance at their correct *vaidik* hour with the twilight. But 'better late than never' was Sarasvati's working rule so far as men were concerned.

Sundaram turned the cup uneasily in his hands, up and down, half afraid to declare by word of mouth that it was empty. Sarasvati shot a look of scorn from the left corner of her left eye, and pointed out the well outside that shone in lonely splendour unconscious of its tragic part in this little drama of life. Then she softened a little and with an air of contempt and condescension showed the tub near her.

Sundaram stole to the tub of water like a cat to the hidden pot of milk. Seeing that things were going too far even on the first day, he mustered a little courage to nip the mischief in the bud.

"You call this a fit place for bears. It is the most envied spot, dear, on the whole line. The trains

are few. The traffic is nil. Tranquebar, the Queen of the Coast, is but a station off and waits for you. Ours is a little paradise if only we care to enjoy it well together. Enough have I slaved in junctions both night and day without rest or sleep! Here the work is nothing; indeed my pay is pension."

"Yes, indeed, your pay is on the pension scale, twenty rupees a month. My brother will be ashamed even to own me. What you get for a month he gets in a day. He rules over the flag in another way." She made a very unkind reference to the station master's emblem of power.

"Yes, yes, he is a very lucky fellow. Whoever thought that Rangan would bloom into an I.C.S.! Is he now an Assistant Collector at Guntur? All can't be Collectors: then trains won't run."

Sundaram attempted humour to scatter the frown that had gathered like bees on Sarasvati's lotus-face, and continued in a slightly ingratiating tone, "But why, dear, he has not been writing to you of late? When is his marriage? We can travel free to any station in the S. I. R. I hope we shall get an invitation."

Sarasvati ignored the question proudly and asked her own. "Why have you spread out to-night so broad a leaf like an eating *purohit*?"

Sundaram hoping that supper would have an excellent effect on her temper and save a domestic collision whose after-effects it would take a long time of skill and patience to repair, ran through the *sandhya* with great speed letting much water slip between his fingers. Then he himself took out a broad plantain leaf to save the angry Goddess any trouble, and began to spread it out gracefully and invitingly for his meals. He sprinkled a little water thereon, cleaned it nicely over and over again, and in subdued grunts and appropriate gestures was declaring himself ready.

Sarasvati caught him in the act and put the above incisive query.

Sundaram dared a straight reply this time "Because plantain leaves grow splendidly in our compound. It is a fertile spot the like of which you don't have for many miles around?"

"Then eat the leaves; for rice bags don't grow wild here, and twenty rupees can't feed two souls."

"Dear, rice bags too will grow wild for us very soon. If you would but learn a little patience and pray for the favour of God."

"Learn it yourself and earn first the favour of railway gods."

"It will come with God's favour. The goods section will soon be opened, and, Sarasu, you will have then everything for the mere asking : the finest table-rice, gram and pulse. God has fixed a generous scale of fees to the underpaid and over-worked dogs of this earth."

(3)

Sundaram spoke sitting, and polishing his leaf patiently with sprinkled water which rolled like drops of pearl from end to end on the fresh plantain leaf. Sarasvati stood like a goddess in a prophetic fit of anger. Peace or war trembled in the balance like the water-drop on his own fresh leaf. Peace it proved to be.

Sarasvati, overwhelmed with a gracious mood, wheeled into the kitchen with a stately motion all her own, and slipped a plateful of cooked rice all over the leaf in such fine disorder as only an angry and unblessed wife knows how to slip.

The sight of polished rice in unbroken grains of beauty swept away all taste in Sundaram even for a manly protest. He began his story of pacification with increased zest, dramatically opening another chapter of his conquest for his Cleopatra's sake.

"The local magnate is already my friend. You don't know how mighty rich he is : three hundred *velis*, two thousand acres of first-class *nanja*. Even from the station-yard we can spy his hay-ricks and grain-heaps high as hillocks. It is a sight for the gods."

Sundaram had read in novels of women's delight in the tale of rich and powerful men. Why not try the effect of an aristocratic neighbour's story on the peevish mind and mood of Sarasvati ?

"Yes, Mr. Mudaliar is already my friend. We owe indeed this railway line to him, and this beautiful little station of Akkur is wholly a creation of his. It's for his sake that this station has been planned and plotted ; it is of no use to others. It is his own. He asked for it in a voice of command and got it. Mr. Mudaliar is a member of the Taluk Board and the District Board. His proud boast is that he signs his name in such a way in Tamil that it is easily mistaken for English. He even thinks of standing for the Legislative Council. A rich man can do many magic things in this world, dear."

Sarasvati seemed to listen to the story. Sundaram chuckled : "Yes, reading maketh a full man and novel reading maketh one a good pilot in stormy seas."

"The great Mudaliar swept into the station this afternoon in all the glory of the new Auburn Sedan to catch No. 9. He was gaily dressed like a peacock, and his white teeth shone like lightning in a cloud-spread sky. He is young, corpulent and unmarried. His body gleams like anointed steel. That's the way of all old fat and blue flesh."

Sarasvati nodded leave to go on briskly with the story hinting that the philosophic bits be left out.

"Fortunately, No. 9 was late by half an hour, as the driver was kept a trifle longer by his lady love at Tranquebar. I had the whole time with Mr. Mudaliar. We gave him our best chair. Though it had a broken leg, it was well fixed with a country nail—our porter, Karian, is a fine fellow, and he used his inherited skill,—his father was a big *mirasdar*—to bring together a broken leg and a chair, and charge a carpenter's fee for the same! Mr. Mudaliar was very kind to me and he promised me his support. On his return he will send us two bags of first-class *irriku semba* rice. I understand that the station master is reckoned part of his household and royal luggage."

Sundaram boldly spun the tale. Half of it was fact and the other half the legitimate inferences of an aspiring, hen-pecked mind in an hour of crisis.

And Sarasvati's smile was worth any bold venture or gypsy tale. Yes, there were visible signs of returning good temper. Sarasvati's face was lit with a very sly smile.

Sundaram rejoiced beyond measure. He would have even clapped for joy. But the right hand was busy gathering into a regular mound the fine grains of rice scattered all over his leaf. Thank God, it was broad enough.

"As for the goods section, it is as good as sanctioned, all a question of days. You'll have everything you dream of, dear, from petty greens to lordly cabbage; from choice fuel to table-rice, gram and pulse; of course, all free. Mudaliar himself exports to Colombo twenty thousand bags of rice every year, and imports in return all fruits and flowers, all dainties and luxuries from Kashmir to Cape Comorin. And everything must pass through our hands, of course, dear."

"Twenty thousand bags of rice! Incredible, mighty rich he must be for that! What does he do with all that flood of wealth?" There was a subtle change in Sarasvati's voice and now one understood the native charm of her talk in peaceful moods. Her face glowed like the morning sun after its first conquest of circling clouds.

Sundaram felt the triumph of his strategy. He continued in an absorbed tone, "Yes, yes, marvelously rich these fellows are, and equally idle and vicious. The miser's hoard of three generations of sweated labour of the poor is now melting in the light of day. The young Mudaliar has a nice band of advisers, and I understand that the station master of Akkur has an ex-officio place therein. He has already finished the liquid cash of ages. I'm told that his gay march this evening was to a money-lender at Mayavaram. I've tramped from Rameshwar to Peshawar, dear, and nowhere the idle rich are so selfish, callous and low as here in our own Tamil land. Polished rice has cut at the root of all our manly virtues and tamarind has soured us for ages and completed the ruin."

Sarasvati was getting more and more absorbed in the story and was just beginning to discover a slender vein of poetry in her lord. Has sylvan solitude and sea-breeze such mystic effects on overworked and under-fed men? She wondered.

Sundaram thought that this mellow mood was a ripe occasion to ask for a favour. He had not yet progressed with his meals. He was all along waiting for soup. After serving him with rice so

well, Sarasvati sat down opposite to him intent on the tale, with all the grace and majesty of her static pose and perfect beauty.

Sundaram gently began, "The rice is rather getting cold; the place is as chill as Ooty. Some *sambar* if you please, dear."

Sarasvati fell from Heaven.

Sambar! Is there any feast to-day? Why do you love this *sambar* so wretchedly well? Now I see that it is the tamarind in the *sambar* that has soured you indeed, as you say."

Sarasvati repeated herself. *Sambar!* Is there any feast to-day? I've not had the time even to set my things in order or wash my face. Is it not enough to get cooked rice on the first day in a new house? Strange indeed are the ways of men! They think no better of us than as beasts of burden and toys of pleasure."

There was a strange virgin glint in her eyes and an uncanny look in her face. The malady seemed far deeper than the immediate cause of *sambar*. Every touch of home life seemed to hurt her deeply.

Sundaram simply collapsed. There was a hushed silence for several minutes.

(4)

Middle-statured, a little soft and plumpy, shining with the colour of burnished gold, Sarasvati looked a round-faced, perfect beauty. There was a virgin freshness and glow in her face. The high brow, the rising forehead, and the eagle nose and eyes, and the unfading lustre of a high-class Brahmin girl gave her a magnet charm, a marked look of distinction and aristocratic birth to which she had really no claim. Hers was a humble birth and her classic beauty was a strange gift of the gods in the infinite mutations of life.

Her father was an agent in the household of one of the leading aristocratic Mahratta Brahmin families of Tanjore. Though his pay was only ten *kalam*s of paddy and five rupees a month, he was the real master of the household. In such an environment of aristocratic culture and refinement, Sarasvati grew till her tenth birth-day.

The great house had a sudden fall. It went into insolvency. For, the traditions of hospitality were royal without royal means, and three important law suits went against it in all the courts. Sarasvati's father died with his chief, a broken-hearted man, when she was just ten. Her mother lived only to see her married at fourteen.

Sundaram was a remote, poor kinsman of hers. He was a bright boy at College at the time of his wedding. But a strange ill-luck seized him almost immediately after. A wander-lust filled his mind once proficient in geography in the High School. He roamed all over India without a pie in his pocket as a young *sadhu*, thanks to the beneficent railway system which winks at a free ride by all who care to smear their bodies with the sacred ash, and tell the beads piously when the flying squad of ticket examiners click their fingers before them as so much of their own time and money wasted.

Somehow this roaming life for Sundaram came to an end when a kindly and young Assistant Traffic Superintendent, recently and directly recruited to the Service, discovered this bogus young *sadhu* at Madura. He sympathised with the story of Sundaram's wedded but truant and unfulfilled life, appointed him a ticket-collector at Mayavaram on promise that he would take in his partner and set up home and live a settled life.

Sundaram's, as a ticket-collector and signaller, was a splendid record of good and earnest work. He kept his promise and set up home. But even on the first day he saw that Sarasvati was too great for him, too much above him in every way ;

indeed, too great for the touch of man. He appeared to himself as a slender stream of water springing from obscure depths, humbly flowing by the side of a mighty river which moved with all the majesty of a mountain-birth and inborn motion. He dared not break the lofty bunds of reserve and mix with the moving stream his humble offering of love. He was content to crawl along by her side, a stranger obeying instinctively her sweeping curves of gesture and high turns of mind.

But Mayavarm did Sundaram one definite good. It gave him back his old school-boy love of books. And one common trait cheered him, that Sarasvati too loved and reading became a voracious reader of books; thanks to the Higginbothams' book-stall and to the friendly relations he kept up with its clerk, who shared with him the decent view that books are in the first place for being read, then for sale to those who can buy but do not read.

Sundaram was tired of the strenuous work and night vigils at the Mayavaram Junction for over three years. When the branch line was opened from Mayavaram to Tranquebar he had his eyes on Akkur, the coveted station on the whole line. He knew that his urban-minded partner would scarcely like the calm, the solitude and the grandeur of

Akkur. But he was not prepared for the thunderstorm even on the opening day.

Sundaram had merits of his own which yielded decisive success in many measures of life. His was the insinuating way. He had not the frank and striking force of direct action. He made a point through endless manœuvres. Usually he doubled this skill before the august presence of Sarasvati. That was the fatal error. Women hate this kind of skill and Sundaram had read of it even in the cheaper novels of the book-stall. But in real daily life, it was impossible for him to change by magic or tuition the winding, sneaking tissues of his body or the secret glands that poured continuously this malicious stream of subtle strategy into his halting blood. The net result was that Sundaram was still waiting on this fateful day for his *sambar* while Sarasvati was squatting with the full splendour of her queenly face turned on him like a searchlight.

Time passed painfully and the delicate deadlock continued.

No. 10 on her return journey from Tranquebar was screaming at the outer as No. 13. Whistles shrieked with a vengeful noise and a petulant ire. Sundaram was still waiting for *sambar*, still mound-

ing the scattered pearls on his broad leaf. He broke this fine work at the first scream of the whistle, and scattered the heap of rice all around in anger as the one act of protest, and rushed out to receive the roaring train, crying at the top of his voice : "In the branch line, they have no sense of time. They come and go early and late as they choose. But that shall never be hereafter. Where is the scoundrel, Karian?"

CHAPTER VII

KARIAN'S VERSATILITY

(1)

While Sundaram was thus usefully employed, Karian had no less an exciting time after leaving the toddy-shop. Karian was a very popular fellow at Akkur, as he was the unchanging centre of attraction. Station-masters come and go but Karians always remain like the solid rails on the railroad, and they are as imperative for the motion and safety of trains. Karian's orbit of work is more varied, and he, like the postman, is the connecting link with the world. Karian was the most vivacious of porters who ever touched the points and side-tracked a train to the station yard.

Karian had his own free quarters within the beautiful and shady premises of the Akkur station. But it was such a small square of solid brick and mortar with a little aperture for light and air that Karian thought that it only enhanced the menial nature and slavish mark of his job, to confine his

roaming spirit to the cubicle of solid railway masonry, exposing his household to the jesting looks of enquiry and the prying gaze of every passer-by in the train.

Though the rules did not permit it, Karian practically lived a furlong away from the station in a little cocoanut garden in the village proper in an old-fashioned house. His wife came of an aristocratic family still partially clinging to the ancient holding in spite of the disruptive influence of modern refinements and luxuries. This doubled his obligation not to expose her to the vulgar gaze of passengers.

But Karian himself was a gay fellow and still young. He had seen much of life in his dashing younger days when he levied his pleasure from the fairest of the surrounding young. Many villages lay at the mercy of his predatory amours, and it was only the waning reputation of his family and his purse that curbed the legitimate expansion of his juvenile ideals.

But his wife led a very virtuous life, loyal to her lord, and reared with love and care her four children. This issue of the body Karian viewed as the signpost of weak and insipid moments in his most accomplished life of amatory adventures.

Karian was growing more irregular especially after Kandan's arrival as if to emphasise the diverse quality and richness of the same stock. And recently a young girl of fifteen, fair and fresh as a flower not yet plucked from the stem and knitted into a garland, drew his attention. He spotted her one day alighting at the station like a fairy from the blue sky. And he knew not a day of rest thereafter, and even the rumbling of trains grew faint to his ears which echoed with the silver peals of her merry and innocent voice.

Karian often exclaimed in reverie-talks to himself, "The little, blue bird, with so fine a plumage, still fluttering about hither and thither, and not yet caged even for a day. At the worst, I'd take her as my second wife." Karian had long ago decided on another and waited only for a suitable lady of youth and beauty. Even in his drunken hours Kamakshi was his sole thought and passion.

Immediately after taking leave of Kandan so fraternally at the toddy-shop, Karian hurried home as best he might after so much drink to his credit. But his progress was suddenly arrested in the middle of his way by the sudden and unexpected vision of the beautiful Kamakshi who emerged on the main road from a by-path, and met Karian unexpectedly.

She was carrying a bundle of plantain leaves and fruits, a rattan box and a cosy, little bed. Evidently she was on her way to the railway station.

Was the bird taking flight all on a sudden even without singing her first song, even before he had made one real attempt to catch her? Karian even in his drunkenness felt so much and very clearly. For drink gives both drive and clarity in certain matters of the flesh. Kamakshi's bird-like beauty, innocent and unwedded, had a fascinating and pulling charm for Karian even as the full moon for the sea.

"Sweet girl, Kamakshi, where goest thou in this dark night all alone?"

Karian bravely seized the situation being an old veteran in the art.

"To the station, Karia; to Mayavaram, a wingless, homeless little bird has but to go on hopping from tree to tree. Is it not time for you for the train? You are still here?"

"There's plenty of time. Don't fear, I'll guide you—the night is dark, don't go alone. I'll buy a ticket for you, Kamakshi, and put you in the train. Come home with me; I shall run up and take a morsel of food. Then we shall both go to the station."

The voice and eyes of Karian became significant with the look of violent love. Kamakshi, a shrewd girl aided by the instinct of protection native to her sex, and smelling the drunkenness of the man hastily said, "I'm not a funk. I'll find my way to the station. You go home and get quick. And it is time for you as well to be at the station. Run home and get quick."

So saying, she moved hurriedly with a decided gesture of alarm, lest he should try to molest her.

Karian was at least for a kiss on this rare occasion which might never recur. Clever and smart girls like Kamakshi never yield to mere cooing or sweet words, but always only to bold and prompt action. That was Karian's triumphant way of looking at things feminine. But he heard the rumbling of wheels at a distance and a slender row of Dietz's lanterns glimmering between the avenue trees. Karian's better sense prevailed even in his drunkenness. He sped home considerably alarmed and agitated and with a double grievance against his wife.

(2)

Karian had not sent home a pie of his earnings for over a month, not to speak of his extras for the

week. With her own slender means from her father's, Karian's wife was keeping up bravely the show of her household. Too proud to borrow, for the first time in her life she thought of borrowing a measure of rice from her neighbour that evening. But she could not gain the courage to do it. So she waited, straining her eyes and ears awaiting her lord.

Soon hearing footsteps, she opened the door. But to her surprise it was not Karian but Kandan. She retreated towards the kitchen gracefully.

"Madam, don't be afraid. Karian and I have become friends from this evening, once again dear cousins. Has Karian not yet come? I thought he should have by this time. But that doesn't matter. How are things going on with you—children doing well? Why I see no signs of light or cooking—tell me without reserve."

Meanwhile, all the crying four came to Kandan's knees and asked for sweetmeats and food. Kandan took in the whole situation at a glance and muttered to himself, "Karian has been drinking away the money! I know it all—here is a rupee."

Kandan flung the rupee gently to her as if he meant it for the children. The silver piece cleared half the ground and clanged on the mud floor.

The echo had hardly died when Karian burst into the room, in what mood, we know!

"Kanda, you are here—all alone, making love to my wife? Is it for this you befriended me this evening* in your own wily way—and this silver rupee in the middle of the room—token of the bargain?" Karian was in unbounded rage.

Kandan tried to appease him as best as he could. "Dear cousin, do not lose your temper or wits without knowing the whole. Sure that you would be here before me, I came just to continue and carry home the reconciliation, and also pay my respects to *anni*. Don't make any foolish charge in haste."

Kandan paused in vain for a reply. He boldly decided to challenge Karian's way of living.

"I inferred everything, your cruel neglect of wife and children: you've never brought home a rupee these fifteen days, and all are more or less starving. I thought I was in duty bound to give a rupee and save the children at least; don't you hear them crying piteously before your very eyes?" Kandan thought that Karian must now be faced very boldly and continued, "If you resent the offer, I'll take back the rupee. Your children are my children, Karia. Who are there for me in this wide world except you and your boys?"

But Karian was raging beyond the reach and reason of kind or sweet words. He pushed, a little roughly, Kandan back and fiercely nodded him out.

A drunkard needs a morsel of food at home quick on his return. Finding none, he took a spade shaft that lay idle near-by and sent it hurtling down his wife's head. She fell bleeding to the ground and lay prostrate and motionless.

Meanwhile, Kandan slipped a little to the back of the house and watched. Hearing the crash of the blow he now raised a huge alarm of 'murder' 'murder.' The whole village thronged to the scene.

Just then No. 13 screamed at the outer and the searchlight played steadily lighting the whole track as if with moonlight. Karian ran doubling to the station. For even in his drunkenness and strife, he remembered that on the second line there lay an empty train and the points were perhaps set wrong.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GLORY OF WORDS IN THE GLORY OF MOTION

(1)

While Karian was thus making amatory advances to Kamakshi, and Sundaram was exquisitely manœuvring for *sambar*, Rangan was skilfully negotiating with his fellow passengers for a decent seat for Rajeswari Bai in the crowded third-class compartment of the Boat Mail.

But Rangan's graceful diplomatic negotiations came to nothing. For the passengers were in no mood easily to part with space so preciousely won. They rivalled in their air of fatigue a besieging army resting in camp after a victorious attack on an impregnable fortress.

The third-class compartment itself looked a delightful combination of a museum and a menagerie. All kinds of beds, boxes and bags were there in scattered heaps of confusion, from the crude rattan of rustic workmanship to the latest models in

finished crocodile skin that incidentally revealed the heart of the refined rich owner. The passenger traffic was no less varied, ranging as it did from two stalwart *bairagees* with an uncombed beard of half a century's real standing to the finished products of modern culture, Rangan and Rajeswari; from a pious fasting Brahmin telling his beads to a half-inebriated Indian *dorai* in hat and kakhi shorts, puffing his cigar and rolling the smoke contemptuously but ceremoniously straight into the dilated nose of the fasting Brahmin, who in his impotent rage could mutter only curses and mix them up with his expiatory *mantras*.

But all this exquisite variety was but even load to the steam-power that pulled majestically for the sheer joy of its own self-expression.

At last, Rangan had succeeded in securing for Rajeswari Bai decent seating accommodation though elbowed on one side by a hairy rustic in loin-cloth and on the other by a burly *bairagee* pilgrim with the usual appalling black shirts which carried the mud and the dirt of every degree of latitude from Rameshwar to Haridwar and Badri.

But Rajeswari gazed at the scene of third-class poverty, variety and richness with the innocence and wonder of a child, and the ease and tranquillity of a keen observer.

But Rangan could not secure for himself seating accommodation for all his cleverness in speech and distinction in manners. He was all along standing gracefully at ease twinkling his eyes pathetically in search of comradeship. His trousered legs, a little long and lanky for the occasion, were caught between the militant knee-caps of a virile Muhammadan who temporarily allowed this indignity of touch, having been dazed with the glory of Rajeswari's beauty. But Rangan was keenly aware that he might recover any moment and make a protest by a fierce grinding of his knees.

So, feeling alarmed, he was just beginning diplomatic questions to see if there would arise any early vacancy near him, though he knew pretty certain that the Boat Mail carried only long distance passengers and his own destination was probably the nearest. With a sigh of resignation, he made up his mind to forget the keenness of his situation and the ill-graces of the previous hour by some brilliant and energetic conversation.

"Rajee, I made a fool of myself under your spell and courted all these troubles unnecessarily at the third-class booking-office in a real moment of confusion."

"Yes, by buying first-class tickets for luggage,

and third-class for men. That's surely the way of the Heaven-born Service."

"Yes, very foolish indeed as I see it all now. But were you in my place, Rajee, you'd have done likewise. Now we see clearly that we might have travelled third with first-class tickets but that did not somehow strike me then, in that wretched, crowded hour with porters yelling at your feet, only five minutes for the train to start and you imperiously bidding me!"

"That's the fault of Collectors travelling without their camp-clerks to prepare notes for their guidance."

"Don't be cruel, Rajee, in your own inimitable way. When did you pick up this caustic humour—there seems to be a revolution up in the air at Bombay. Your cross attitude threw me entirely off the balance. My mind was in a swirl when you refused to travel first, which I had arranged for after so much of toil and skilled diplomacy. Even riotous crowds I've faced with greater calm, but I couldn't quell you at all this evening." Rangan attempted a faint smile for he was already feeling his legs giving way under the cramp and fatigue, after all the miracles they had performed that evening.

"But even this is an experience which both Collectors and Congress women should welcome and profit by. I'm not sorry at all. Are you all right there, Ranga, comfortable?"

Rajee saw Rangan wrestling with his legs vaguely on the bottom floor with some distress signalled to his face.

"Yes, I'm quite all right, Rajee."

Almost at once the big toe of Rangan sent an S.O.S. message to his head. For it was mightily crushed in the capricious fortunes of the crowded third-class. A throb of pain flitted across Rangan's face. But he bore it bravely in that hour of public trial of his endurance. He finally extricated himself from the vagaries of his Muhammadan neighbour, dexterously wheeling a little more to the left and nearer to Rajee. And this seemed a paradise of safety to Rangan. And his tongue was at once released in the atmosphere of freedom.

"But I tell you, Rajee, this last hour of my life has made me thoroughly sick of men and things, quite sad at heart for the sake of our own people. How little we have grown in the true habits that make civic life a pleasure the world over! Fifty years of railway travelling has taught us nothing. We've learnt nothing, we've forgotten

nothing. We've not improved a jot. See, our carriage looks like a parcel van in which the passengers seem perched like so many thieves. Why not book these extra things and put them in the van?"

"And trust the guard with all your valuablé—" growled the Muhammadan who mentally regretted that Rangan had escaped his educative knee-grip, "that way you can never travel with peace of mind. You may as well thrust your crying girl into the van because it is very inconvenient to keep her here. What harm is there in spending one sleepless night out of three hundred and sixty-four? Every nigger with a hat on thinks that he is a *dorai* travelling first-class."

Rajeswari did not care to continue to listen to this conversation but kept her eyes on another man in the same carriage. She spoke to Rangan in a low voice, "You see there, Ranga, do you make out that half-awake man at the corner near the window?"

"Yes, it's he who showed us in!"

"Yes, it's he who shoved us in time, Ranga."

"We must thank him for his kindness."

"Yes, thank him if you please, and draw him nearer. I think he must be a spy. I'm sure,—he's set on me to watch my movements."

"Impossible!" cried Rangan.

"Quite possible, you yourself said this evening that I was being watched. I saw him in another dress in the morning, just in front of the guest-house, bathing and swimming in the Adyar river, frolicking gaily like a fish in a royal pond—and then dry and clean, carolling in the by-paths of the cocoanut gardens hopping like a bird, craning his neck at every bush, flower and tree,—only a well-fed C.I.D. can sing like that, the sweetest tunes of indolence at the most critical hour of our national life."

"And really so!" echoed Rangan in wonder and alarm fearing that he too might be watched.

"And by the way that he is now looking at us with screwed eyes gleaming alternately over you and me, I'm sure that you are identified even in the third-class and also being watched."

"I also being watched—impossible!"

"Quite possible,—highly probable. For men like you gifted with so level a mind and vision are loved by neither the Government nor the people. In truth, I think that on this man's report hangs your fate—Assistant Collector at Tanjore with Sessions powers, or a mere Settlement Officer somewhere on the Palni Hills measuring piously hillslopes and valleys".

There was an inspired cadence in Rajeswari's voice.

"Rajee, there is a mystic ring in your voice. But take it from me, Rajee, I'll never be that: a Settlement Officer, as a mark of degradation, in this patriotic hour! The third-class affair has already bitten my mind; to tell you the truth, embittered my soul,—yes, I think British Raj should go at least for its heartless railway policy, and the sad neglect of the poor third-class travelling public who are huddled together no better than sheep in a pen."

Rangan spoke with genuine emotion, a rare thing even in the midst of his finest periods. And Rajeswari watched intently the crater of this volcano in action which she had thought to be long ago extinct.

"Dear Rajee, be sure of my words. Sometimes trifles hurt us too deeply and tenderly, like coal-dust in the eyes. Then even the glory of motion seems wretched."

"I'm glad, at last, Ranga, something of the old spirit is up in you, kindling your mind and heart and making once again a patriot of you. Yes, let us call that man up, thank him first and watch the drift of his speech, and the strange wonder in his

eyes that seems to mask and misinterpret everything about him."

"Yes, Rajee, we'll call him up and thank him."

"If he proves a spy as we suspect him to be, he will certainly be glad to give up his present, nice place by the window, and share with us this crowded latrine corner—for the sake of the duty, that gives him the easy bread."

"The tainted bread," crashed Rangan in a harsh voice.

A quick change was coming over him and Rangan perspired profusely at the forehead. There was a tremor in his voice and a deep roll of flashing anger in his eyes.

The Boat Mail seemed to tremble on the track, and quail on the lips of the shining rails. It sped at sixty miles an hour for the sheer joy of the gradient, winding along the lake bund like a serpent in its racing hour of love.

(2)

"Tranquebar, Ranga, the name reminds me of our saintly Kandan. Yes, Kandan is colonial-born, but is not Tranquebar the birth place of his ancestors?"

This sudden reference to Kandan overtook Rangan, and his already anguished soul felt a keen

throb of pain. Rajee knew the effect Kandan's name would have on Rangan.

"There was always, Ranga, a tragic glory in Kandan's ways, and he always seemed to walk on earth with a firm but alien step. Kandan's was a splendid sacrifice—he left you so abruptly in the I.C.S., probation period when a royal life like yours now was so near him—who will do it? Did you hear from him or do you know of his movements?"

Rangan made no answer, for his head was in a whirl and speeded quicker than the Boat Mail. And he did not fully follow Rajee's tribute to Kandan's sacrifice.

Indifferent to Rangan's silence, Rajeswari proceeded.

"He wrote to me in lyric prose a pensive note of resigned love-lornness and resolve to dedicate his life to the uplift of his Mother Country. The whole letter was sweet and short, and I saw the vivid, magic face of Kandan, the broad forehead and the calm shining eyes lit with the steady light of the man slowly but surely gaining the conquest of his senses. He wrote to me that he was coming home to his native Tamil land for social and political work, some little selfless deed for his fellowmen. I thought he would call on me at Bombay on his

way home. Perhaps he changed his mind or never came at all. Ranga, do you hear me or are you asleep? Does the rumbling train make you sleepy—no doubt you deserve a first-class berth for all your feats at the third-class booking-office."

"No, no, dear Rajee, you are again at it, the unlucky turn of things for me this evening. Kandan's name put me in a reverie of very many long-forgotten things. Yes, I do think with you now that we didn't do justice to Kandan's sweet character and great sacrifice. Yes, he deserves all that you say. Unlike us, unlike me at any rate, he is a man of deeds, deeds not on grooved lines making but deeper the ruts of social life, but on lines of pioneering choice of his own. Yes, Rajee, he is a rare soul and a common good for the whole world like the pure monsoon cloud that rains everywhere for the mere impetuous joy of it."

"I'm glad, Ranga, that Kandan's name warms you up and sets free the true Rangan in you as I've always known you for. This generous spirit is the true index of a coming change over you, a change of heart that gives me a joy that is beyond your knowing."

Rangan felt a secret flood of glory sweeping through his veins. And Rajee's lotus-eyes, ever-

broad and daring, lengthened a little and changed to fawn-like beauty and meekness.

"Yes, Rajee, your approval pleases me beyond measure. I know something more of Kandan, all to his credit, that would fill you with joy all the more. Kandan comes of a very ancient aristocratic stock, the finest blue-blood in the District—but now the whole lot very, very poor. They thrived well once as headmen of a big village near Tranquebar, under the Danish rule. The change of Government to the British has wrought all this change for Kandan's family. Yes, you are right, under the British Raj, the Indian village has suffered the most cruel blow. None but the Collector thrives in a District, like the blue-gum tree sucking for its own feed all the moisture around, even as in an Insolvency none but the Official Receiver thrives. It's the old, old story of the monkey that adjudicated the difficult, delicate claims of cats over a stolen bit of cheese."

"I didn't know, Ranga, that you knew so much of Insolvency Law, and many thanks for your roaming story. But what about Kandan's? You know anything of his movements now?"

"Know nothing; that's why these figures of speech; and they are so easy and helpful to fill up the gaps."

"Kandan's father did some excellent work under Mahatmaji. Ranga, I think that has set free the patriot's soul in Kandan."

"But I rather think, Rajee, that disappointed love for you,—remember, your appreciation of Kandan was not half so warm as it's now,—that unreturned love was thrown inward and changed to love of the great Mother, a thing, I think, so natural and lovely to all higher minds. And I'm pretty sure that if you reject me as well, surely I would court a patriot's death peacefully and nobly."

"I wish then at least for my country's cause that I might have the courage to make a patriot of you," Rajee spoke in halting tones somewhat unusual with her, and blushed a little.

"And yet there is something more, Ranga; the itch for service is in the blood. There's something in ancestry, something in pedigree. The headman of a village for generations can't help doing even under changed and poor conditions some public work; for the thing is in the blood."

Rangan rubbed his hands with impatience.

"It's but right, Ranga, that colonial-born Kandan should do something for the Mother Country at this most useful and auspicious hour."

"Kandan is not colonial-born, Rajee, though it is

true he is thoroughly colonial-bred. His father's flight is a most romantic story. Kandan's mother died while her little babe was but six months old. Nagappan fled to Natal taking with him Kandan, then a little boy of three. "

Rajee listened intently and cried, "Truly romantic and brave flight—all this adventure should have some hidden purpose—Nature's own mysterious ways. What a splendid sacrifice Kandan's life has been, Ranga! It's a pity I didn't know his inner self well at Oxford. "

Rangan's mood suddenly changed, and he bit his pale lips almost in unconscious confusion.

"Ranga, why are you biting your lips adding but to the sombre effects of the night: getting moody once again? Some reverie with an explanation? Is't that old thoughts are flooding you again and tormenting you now?"

Rajeswari flung a look of scrutiny, and began again with a voice that seemed to take its sound from the depths of her being. There was the final air of a serene decision in her voice.

"No fear for my sake, Ranga. I'm no more the stormy petrel in the life of any one but the life of my own Motherland. My marriage day is yet very far off. The love of my Mother has driven off my

mind all thoughts of love of the flesh. The great call of my Mother has changed all thoughts of sex into deeds of service and the love has changed into a love for the whole world. A vow of *brahmacharya* has seized me till freedom's cause is won. That's why I think our ancients have consecrated the *sanyasin* order of men to work for the commonweal and spiritual welfare of our race—transmuting the sex-energy into the purer and higher forms of work, work that is worship at the altar of man. God, in some great moment of grace, has whispered to me this secret, the secret that gives purity and strength to all acts, gentility and love—the healing touch of the gods."

These words uttered in a cadence of inward majesty and sincerity moved Rangan profoundly as it seemed to illumine for him some strange, hidden corners. But he knew at the same time that these words sounded the death-knell of his hopes and ideals. There was such a spiritual halo and shining glory in Rajeswari's face and voice that Rangan, the base metal, felt the alchemic touch of her breath.

The glory of motion at forty miles an hour sent the winged words, the poetic fancies and intuitive flashes of Rajeswari rolling into sparks of splendour and clouds of thought.

Rangan simply tottered on his aching limbs, aching after an hour's most indecorous standing in the most public place. The crowded hour seemed to him more confused still, and the speeding train appeared to run the wrong way. He felt a thoroughly lost man in half an hour. But the mere sight of Rajee revived him and made life worth the labouring for, with all its strange turns and twists, turns and twists that sometime ago seemed only for your marring but now might be to your own making in the long run.

"Look again, Ranga, that man is still squirting at us, his eyes lengthening from the window corner."

"It may be, Rajee,—you don't know your own classic beauty—it may be that he is just vulgarly looking at you as so many fellows do when you pass by."

"But Ranga, I'm not a fool, not yet, to class that one with the other—the prying look of the spy and the vacant-dazed look of the lover—the lover of fleeting beauty that escapes the eyes like a shot of sunshine in a clouded day. Don't bring out idle theories, Ranga. It's not yet too late to thank him decently for his nice help at a critical hour, when your courageous leadership failed. You do it if you

can, or say you leave it to me." Rajeswar^f raised her whispering voice a little at the end almost to the heights of an impatient command.

Rangan, cut to the quick by the sharp and reprimanding voice of Rajeswari Bai, began to act with expedition.

(3)

Wheeling a little to the right on his legs, for still he was standing and the base of his operations was narrow, Rangan called out in an ingratiating voice, "Thank you very much, sir, for your great goodness to put us in at the last moment when we were running about for a seat. We are glad you are travelling with us."

Ponnan made a gracious nod of approval at this belated thanksgiving^f and said, sitting still, and showing no desire to change place nearer, "Don't mention it, is it not our duty when first-class gentlemen like you choose to travel third for the mere sport of it?"

Rangan got alarmed at the extra knowledge he seemed to possess about them.

But Ponnan continued in a very even voice, "The third-class is generally overcrowded. Government should move in this matter promptly, and

then alone these—trifles to them but great hardships to us—could be set right easily. And also the people's representatives, Council Members and Rao Bahadurs should give the lead. But, alas, they travel always first-class at our expense! How could they feel for a thing they know nothing of?"

"That's the curse, sir, look at this," Rangan wailed, sloping his neck, "taking two third-class tickets has cost me this at Egmore, a sprain of the neck and the wrist. And we owe it to you that we got at all into the train." Rangan spoke loudly, craning aloft his neck like an uncrowned king.

"But, sir, when gentlemen like you with respectable ladies travel third for the mere fun of it, you should come at least half-an-hour earlier, and not at the nick of time."

Rangan wished to explain but there came a stroke of eyelids from Rajeswari, soft as lightning through clouds, conveying caution. And Rangan also felt that it would be too much to reveal the full tale to a stranger, though his righteous anger deserved all available outlets for expression. So he simply nodded apologetically and said: "At this rate, BritishRaj will come to an end—not so much by the Congress shouts but by this blighting neglect of the people in their truest need."

"True, sir," Ponnan eagerly intervened, "this neglect embitters the mind for a moment but leaves no scar behind or an open wound to bleed for ever—it is like the sparks that fly from the engine. These grievances die, like the sparks, the moment they are born. But there's another thing, a truer cause, the neglect of these poor fellows, voiceless and dumb, even to utter the deepest cries of pain; have you ever, sir, seen their abject misery at home,—wife and children not knowing from where the food would come for the morrow? Theirs is a cruel lot in this callous world; willing to work but no work anywhere. Even if they work the hardest, it hardly suffices them for the needs of the day, and the morning sun rises again as bleak and cold as ever. So lean and wretched lives you can nowhere see among God-created things, vegetable or animal life. Their cradle gift is chill poverty, and they are blessed all through life with nothing but grinding labour. Hungry hours crowd round the crying voice of children, and the maternal heart bleeds in despair. These innocent cries of millions that go mounting up the skies to Heaven will surely break the British Raj very soon."

Ponnan addressed this speech more to Rajeswari than to Rangan. And both listened to the patriotic

and keen-sighted words with love and wonder. Rajeswari's compassionate soul was kindled to generous warmth at this stranger's love for the poor and of the country. She cried out in a real burst of joy, "What's your name, sir? You are wise beyond your age. Your analysis is correct, so simply put, and beautiful!"

"For, I'm one of them, madam,—landless, crushed, down-trodden millions."

"Your name, please?"

"Ponnusami; friends and noblemen call me Ponnai. I come from the Tanjore District from a good stock, long ago settled on the land but now very poor. I ran away to Madras ten years ago as a boy and I've wasted the best part of my life in all the ways of a degraded, urban life. The call of the village has come to me, thanks to Mahatmaji,—I've bidden good-bye to Madras. Now I'm going to Tranquebar—"

"O, Tranquebar!" echoed Rangan and Rajeswari in one voice.

"Yes, to Tranquebar, never more to return to Madras."

"Sir, excuse me; did I not see you in the morning, swimming gaily like a fish in the Adyar river, and singing like a bird under the banyan tree?"

"Were you there near-by, madam? I never took note of men or women this morning. I was in deep communion with my Maker. And Nature was all around so grand. I was lost in the glory of the river and the sky, the sea and the land. Adyar brought back to me my younger days in the sacred Cauvery, the rolling glory of fresh waters and swimming therein from morn to eve, with a doting fondness for water. I touched Adyar to bid her farewell for ever, and render my grateful thanks for the very many hours of peace it has given me these ten years. I'm at heart a village bird caught in an urban cage these ten years—and on the day of my freedom and farewell, I sang a song to my heart's content under the cocoanut trees."

"You are now going to Tranquebar?"

"Yes, to Tranquebar. Mahatmaji's call has come to me as well, the lowest of the low. I'm going to my cousin who is the flower of my family. His is a life of sacrifice as great as that of any patriot. Believe me, he kicked up the career of a Collector so that he might work for his own land and people. He is doing rural reconstruction work and has just now on hand some temperance work near Tranquebar, I understand. I'm joining him."

"His name?" Rajeswari eagerly asked.

"Kandan" cried all the three in one voice.

"Yes, Kandan, madam, how do you know him? I've not till now set my eyes on him. But all alike say that he is the very flower of life, and I'm indeed proud of him as my cousin."

"Yes, Ponna, Kandan is indeed the very flower of life. We know him well. We were together at Oxford. Happy we are that he is here and we have met you. Please take us to him. We are also going to Tranquebar," Rajeswari spoke with warmth.

"You are also coming to Tranquebar! What a lucky day for me! Indeed a new life waits for me from to-morrow," Ponnai spoke seemingly moved by the tide of events.

Rajeswari really felt that her suspicions were ill-founded and unjust. All the three had not a wink of sleep but spent together the remaining hours filling the ears of Ponnai (C.I.D. on his way to a C.I.E.) with the intimate story of their lives, their future plans of political work, and their deepest thoughts for the country.

The glory of motion of the Ceylon Boat Mail gave a hectic glow to the patriotic confessions of Rajeswari and the halting and occasional but bitter and defiant words of Rangan. Rajeswari

spoke with emotion and sincerity, and Rangan kept on nodding assent. Still they were nods that carried within themselves the silent change that sometimes comes over men and things, even Civilians in spite of themselves.

The Boat Mail thundered along the track emitting vainglorious clouds of smoke and long-trailing columns of sparks, as if asking you to admire her matchless speed on narrow South Indian rails.

A stray particle of coal-dust flew into Rajeswari's lotus-eyes. Tear-drops, like pearls, rolled down her palmy cheeks. Rangan and Ponnann gazed in wonder at their pearl-like beauty. But Rajeswari paid the pearls gladly as the price of the glory of motion, and as a warning from God to stop the glory of words.

CHAPTER IX

THE COLLISION

(1)

We left No. 13 screaming at the outer of the Akkur railway station. Sundaram reached his office-room at one bound. The searchlight from the engine played steadily, lighting the whole track in one blaze of glory. Sundaram ran quickly and in anger to lower the semaphore himself, and met Karian partially on the way with a look of equal promptitude and pained surprise.

Sundaram was in a rage. "You, jackal's son, where had you been sleeping all the while?"

"Jackal's son? May be, sir, but sleeping, surely 'no.' There was some trouble at home as there must always be between devoted husband and wife over meals not being ready. I beat her—that takes some time, you know,—one to get the other under control. Ere I could finish with her and get my food, No. 13 is roaring before time. Let her roar! These drunken, lazy loots of engine-

drivers, black as coal and as unsteady as the sparks of fire for a flame, they must be taught a lesson not to run the train before time." Karian was by nature endowed with a touch of fancy, and the toddy-shop and the exciting scenes of the last six hours made him a little more lively.

But Sundaram was interested in another point. He could not help asking even in such a crisis, "Beating your wife, Karia, to get food! Is it possible?" But the train was screaming as if a juvenile, apprentice hand was at the throttle, and there was no time for an elaborate investigation of the methods of Karian to get at his recipe for quick meals which perhaps included *sambar* as well.

"Karia, lower the semaphore, and see that the points are in order." For on the second line, there lay a ballast train with a few empty rakes.

Karian went tottering to the box to lower the semaphore, and the station master cried out, "Karia, Karia, you seem to be stark drunk; take care that you don't fall on the line and get crushed; run ahead and see the points are proper, before you lower the hand."

"Who is dead drunk? Karian, no, impossible. The engine-driver is, I'm sure." Karian roared to

himself at the top of his voice, "The points are damned always, always, all right in this petty station," and lowered the semaphore cursing and muttering to himself, "Come, come, you strumpet. I'll break your jaw even as I broke her head just now. Not a moment of peaceful home-life in this wretched work on the railways."

Hardly the signal had been lowered when No. 13 started thundering along the lines, after a long and shrill whistle that startled even the birds in the nests.

The key barely turned in the door of his office-room. Sundaram had not yet reached even his coat and flag. There was a terrible crash as of engines fighting for way. The little vagabondish No. 13 ran against the ballast train sleeping quietly on the second line.

Sundaram stood thunder-struck.

The crescent moon was struggling through a heavy cloud in the west in her setting moment.

Fortunately there was no injury to life except for a hearty shake at a chill hour. No. 13 came almost empty except for Chockalinga and his gay retinue. But Mr. Mudaliar did not travel as an ordinary passenger, but drove the engine with his mighty hand on the throttle and the driver by his side,

presumably for emergencies. Chockalinga was naturally proud to guide a train himself on a track which was so much his own.

Sarasvati flung aside the social conventions at this critical hour. She, who was never afraid of collisions at home, was taken aback at the terrific sight of riding steel and smashed timber before her very eyes. Almost immediately, she was seen on the platform by the side of her lord with a troubled face wherein anxiety shone like the cloud in the moon.

Yes, collision was in the air since eight o'clock in the evening.

Sundaram offered prayer.

Thank God that the whirlwind, which sprang at home, spent itself abroad.

Thank God that what came to wreck life wrecked only steel and timber.

Yes, collision was in the air since eight o'clock in the evening. Thank God that it wrecked only vagabondish trains and empty rakes, and not young and beautiful lives in their first making.

Sundaram and Sarasvati joined together in their heart of hearts for the first time in their lives and offered their grateful thanks to their All-knowing Maker.

(2)

It was the first collision on the lovely virgin line from Mayavaram to Tranquebar. It was also the first collision of this kind for Sundaram. And for Sarasvati this strange and wild mating of steel and timber awakened a new impulse of earthly awe and reverence.

It seemed to her the sacred hour for the crashing of the shell and the bursting forth of a new and active life. It created in her an interest in the things of the earth. Her heart began to respond for the first time in her life to the call of the environment. The bud began to feel the stirring life of the blossom and the quickening joy of the sunshine. The spring water from the bosom of the Mother has given up the sacred joy of secluded purity. It has risen to its full love in the monsoon hour of plenty to kiss the lips of the bunds and to gain the freedom of the sloping valleys, to leap frolicking down the hills and glades.

And Chockalingam, the great Mudaliar, in equal wonderment was gazing at the moon-like beauty of Sarasvati in that dark hour.

Karian was more inclined to think of himself as an ordinary passenger than as the porter-pointsman

of the station on whose skill and punctuality the safety of trains rests. On the first impulse, Karian thought of escaping, like his great uncle to some foreign land, to avoid the perils of prosecution; he was nearing the fateful age of twenty-four. For he had heard vaguely that he was in the first place responsible for everything that went wrong, from the screw that held firm the rails, to the engine that thundered along.

Kandan too was there. For he usually slept in the open on the sand-dunes nearby under a cluster of cocoanut trees by the side of a little stream. For the open air sleep refreshed and strengthened him after the patriotic fret and fever of the day. And he slept like a child to the music of the moving trains.

Kamakshi too was there frightened by the thought of Karian's amatory advances on the way, still perspiring with the drops of terrified innocence and standing a little close to Sarasvati as if seeking her protection. But Chockalinga, the protector of all, towered high and seemed a pillar of strength.

Meanwhile, the whole village came crowding to the station to see the collision. And Karian's bleeding wife was another exciting factor. She was taken to the station half unconscious. She

was in urgent need of first-aid, and Sarasvati did it with the poise and assurance of a trained nurse.

Sundaram was the first to recover his presence of mind and powers of speech and wondered at Mr. Mudaliar's presence in No. 13.

"Well, Mr. Mudaliar, how is it you are here by No. 13? You went out to Mayavaram by No. 9."

"Yes, but finding my man not there, but at Karaikal, I motored straight and found him there, and spent an hour of delight—my Auburn, you know, races along with me on the road even while I travel by train. Then I drove straight to Tranquebar and found No. 13 just ready and waiting for me, puffing and steaming."

"You drove the train?"

"Yes, but the driver was by my side. We covered five miles in five minutes;—oh, for the racing glory of speed, driving an engine with its strokes of power and motion! But I never thought it would end like this. It is all Karian's work, his stupidity. I shall thrash him some day for this. I hope there won't be any trouble on this score, station master—only a bit of the old rust of the engine plates has been scraped off gratis. At any rate, Sundaram, I trust you can polish off the whole event smoothly."

"I shall see to it, Mr. Mudaliar, don't worry your big mind over these chance trifles. Where there are wheels, there collisions must be—Nature's law, isn't it?" Sundaram poured comfort philosophically into the ears of Chockalingam.

Mr. Mudaliar pointed his fingers in return at the bags of silver rupees in netted purses that lay in the midst of his retinue.

Sundaram's eyes watered at the sight of the shining pieces of silver.

"Don't worry yourself at all about this, Mr. Mudaliar; I shall see to it and set it all right by to-morrow morning."

Already Sundaram felt as if he had taken charge of the money-bags, and felt inwardly the bubbling joy that comes of an easy, royal share in another man's riches. He turned triumphantly to Sarasvati as if to say he was already a made man.

But Chockalinga was nodding graciously all around, aglow with the fires of love, his tender flesh creeping and craving for expression. He was swimming in a dream of joy at the mere thought of Sarasvati's divine beauty, fortunately not above human reach, though there was a vague hint at the bottom of his mind of God's censure of his dreams.

Sarasvati reared herself, like a serpent in the hour

of dangers, to the full stature of her loveliness and womanly dignity. She seemed more of the heaven and the star-lit sky than a creature of earth living on greens and pulses.

Sundaram saw clearly the danger ahead of another collision of another kind brewing. He slowly moved to the station-room, beckoning humbly to Mr. Mudaliar, "It is getting to be very chill here, Mr. Mudaliar, and you must be tired after all this jolt and travel,—and this tragic end. Let us go and sit in the room—and you may even sleep on the office table. Meanwhile, I shall telephone to Mayavaram and set matters right. Karia, carry the bags of silver to the iron-safe."

Mr. Mudaliar accepted the invitation, for he was really feeling sleepy, in spite of the excitement of the collision and the kindling beauty of Sarasvati. Because the five hours of the evening brought a crowded programme, and at Karaikal he had the best of it. Karaikal, a French territory, is famous for its cheap drinks, and Mr. Mudaliar raced all the way from Mayavaram to Karaikal at the top speed of his Auburn Sedan with a faint idea at the back of his mind that he might perhaps spend there a joyous hour or two, free from the responsibilities and cares of British India. He did spend indeed a

full joyous hour, for his banker gave him five thousand instead of the three he had asked for, and took from him a note for ten in the gay hour of revelry.

So Chockalinga was glad to spread himself out on the office table and he soon began to snore. For the young, innocent and aristocratic soul of Chockalinga could never sleep lightly or softly. Sundaram, glad of it, locked the door for double safety, and rejoined Sarasvati who was still standing on the platform with Kamakshi, tending Karian's wife. He soon cleared the station-yard of the miscellaneous surplus crowd; and prepared to think how best to wipe off the evil consequences of the collision.

CHAPTER 'X

THE ARSON

(1)

Sarasvati smiled a very unusual smile of welcome to her lord and said, "Dear, you've not yet finished your supper. Are you forgetting it?"

"Let this be a fasting day for us, well worth it—it's surely the most critical and impressive hour for me. In all the wearied tramps of my life even at Badrinath, I've never had such a chill night and such crowded events."

"Dear, yes, something tells me, the stars whisper to me, that this is the crashing hour of change also for me."

There was a rare sweetness in her voice and a prophetic twinkle in her eyes. Sarasvati under the star-lit sky in the open of the station-yard, pensive, calm, graceful and lovely, waiting for the dawn like the lotus in the pond, seemed almost divine—more a witness from the stars to watch some strange tragic twist of life on earth.

The sand-dunes under the shade of a cluster of cocoanut trees lay but a hundred yards off the station limits, by the side of a little stream. But Kandan did not feel the call of sleep. He was too much overwhelmed to act decidedly.

"Who is this man there looking so calm and noble in this hour of fright, tending Karian's wife? It can't be he is a relation of hers or Karian's. He looks far above it." Sarasvati put an eager question to her lord.

"Yes, he is the first-cousin of Karian. Though but a porter, Karian comes of a good family near-by. Kandan's life is a romance, dear, and more surprising than many tales you have read in fiction. He is colonial-born at Natal, educated at Balliol."

"Educated at Balliol, Oxford!"

"Yes, passed the I. C. S., only to reject it at the probation period. He felt the call of the Motherland as you too so often say you feel, reading the newspapers and speeches—he came over here a year ago, and is doing his best to wash the dog into a horse, which no amount of washing could do."

"But it would at least make the dog clean."

"Only the dog would go back again to the rubbish-heap to lie down curling its tail."

"May be, but still that work is noble. Look at

Kandan, dear, there's real nobility in his face. That's a true worker."

"Now he is labouring for the uplift of the poor village-folk, spending money like water. He wants to do away with the toddy-shop at Akkur—for the last one month he is at it single-handed, picketing and preaching the virtues of a sober life to a lot of chronic drunkards."

Sundaram cleared his throat and continued in a changed and serious voice: "And our Mudaliar who is now snoring there in the booking-office wants to cut him down for ever. He says he is a rebel who disturbs the peace and the social order of his kingdom—you remember he is the lord of two thousand acres. Dear, in a week, history will be made in our Taluk, and Kandan clapped in jail, alas! Our Mudaliar has seen the Deputy Collector this evening at Mayavaram, and these money-bags give a rare executive power to Mr. Mudaliar's words. Nothing like the soul-force of money in these hard days!"

Mr. Mudaliar snored heavily in the office-room and through the key-hole came the nasal sound, rumbling as if a heavy goods train were moving up a steep gradient. Sundaram listened to this rhythmic symbol of sleep for a moment as if it were

music, coming as it did from the nostrils of a rich man, the lord of three hundred *velis*.

In Sarasvati's eyes already Kandan was a hero and a patriot and a martyr to the national cause so dear to her heart. She said, "Dear, call him up here, you know him?"

"Yes, I know him a little. He came to me this morning to receive a parcel of *Khaddar* clothes and a dozen *charkas*, latest models, to distribute them to the poor. He thinks he can make men of these ignorant, drunken, lazy loots, petty thieves and rascals, the serfs and tenants of Mr. Mudaliar, sunk deep in the slime of ages."

"Still, dear," Sarasvati pleaded, "a beginning must be made and some one try his hand at rural work, the salvaging of these wrecks. I think it is the noblest work of our age to give a plan and an aim to these poor rustic lives and improve their lot. Pray, call Kandan. This collision is worth it, if it can give us a man like Kandan. I shall join him in his work with your leave, and end this prisoner's life in this arid place—and cook for you as well, dear, as much *sambar* as you please!" Sarasvati smiled.

Sundaram approached Kandan and said: "Kandan, why do you pace to and fro restlessly? The thing is up and over: the collision for me,

and Karian's wife's broken head for you. Take her to the hospital at Tranquebar by the morning train."

"If I may, I shall also follow her and do the nursing. Poor thing, she has not yet recovered fully her consciousness. Karian is a little brute. He must have been quite drunk to do this cruel deed." Sarasvati spoke in a voice of gentle introduction that fitted in well with the silence of the night.

"The toddy-shop must go; it is the curse of the poor and it keeps the wife and children starving at home and makes the husband a little brute," Kandan pleaded for his favourite cause.

"We have heard of your work, sir, a noble life of sacrifice. Allow us to help you in our own humble way. This is the time for great and good work in our country! When the wind blows, we must glean the grain. Pray accept me and give me a share in your work. The toddy-shop must go, and with it, Mr. Mudaliar too. I don't like the awful, brutish, rolling, covetous eyes of that man. May God's curse fall on his riches, and blight all his granaries and hay-ricks high as hillocks;—riches that don't go to feed the poor and the hungry."

Sarasvati spoke calmly but a prophetic touch of fire vibrated in her voice and gave her face an uncanny beauty.

There was a sacred stillness in the air. Kandan gazed in wonder at the doubled majesty of this prophetic goddess. The pure patriotic fire lit her face and glowed in her eyes. Her cheeks, red as the petals of the lotus, reddened a little more.

Kandan was in a dream. Her nod of approval seemed to him the best reward for all his work, the crowning bliss that saves the man in despair and gives him renewed strength for work.

(2)

Sarasvati turned a little aside to the east to cover the excess of emotion that surged through her being. And she fancied she saw a beautiful glow of reddish dawn in the horizon. She murmured to herself, "It can't be the dawn. It is but eleven o'clock night."

But the truth dawned on her mind abruptly, and she almost screamed, "Turn a little to the east, Kanda. See yonder what this rising redness in the sky means? Are my eyes tricking me? Or are my words coming true so soon?"

Sundaram, Sarasvati, and Kandan gazed on in unutterable wonder at the increasing redness. Thin rolls of smoke came floating up with sparks of fire. That set all doubts at rest.

Kandan almost fainted and cried :

"Alas, Nandan, Mookkan and Katteri; Irullan, Karuppan and Irullappan, alas, Nalla, you too have brought this ruin on me. Arson, arson, alas! The granaries and hay-ricks; my fair name and work lost for ever! Nalla, you have ruined all my year's work in the rash act of a drunken moment."

"Not only there, look hither, the toddy-shop too is on fire." Sarasvati's keen eyes observed another smaller roll of smoke in the neighbourhood and she pointed it out gloriously.

"I'll be held responsible for all this. It may be too late. Still I shall run up and see, and do my duty. Mr. Station-master, please stir the sleeping Mudaliar and tell him of his tragic fate for the night." So lamenting, Kandan shot out of the station like a wounded man.

"Twenty thousand *kalams* of paddy, worth half a lakh, and twenty hay-ricks high as hillocks—all burnt down. Mr. Mudliar is a ruined man, and he won't recover at all hereafter." Sundaram

uttered to himself these wise words of future estimate as he slowly regained his powers of speech.

In half-an-hour, the Akkur railway station became a regular pandemonium. Everyone came crowding to the station, as it stood on a little eminence of sand-dunes. From there, you could see with safety the progress of the fire in all its stages,—the thin stray smoke resembling kitchen fire, heaving and rolling and gathering thick into dense rolls of smoke circling high in the sky, mingled with the sparks of fire, and finally the long, long, leaping tongues of flame.

There is a terrible majesty in things on fire. It is a sight of fascinating terror to all alike. The rich and the poor, the safe and the imperilled, join in the wail, crying out for help, but admiring inwardly the speeding of matter to the eternal home of the unchanging spirit. The wind that wafts the echoing cries of 'help,' 'help' from one voice to another but idly fans the flame.

(3)

Sundaram gazed in wonder. But it was interrupted by a telephone-call from the headquarters. "The new Assistant Collector of Tanjore is

coming by the Boat Mail from Madras and stays a week at Tranquebar. He would like to have his bed-coffee at Akkur, just at the break of dawn. Please arrange."

"What about the collision—I phoned to you an hour ago."

"What about it! You'll be fired after the enquiry. Now you may carry on for a few days. Railway dogs shouldn't be afraid of getting lame some day."

Sundaram's heart seemed to move up to his throat. But he beat the poor pulsing thing down by a determined will. Turning a little to the other side, he saw Mr. Mudaliar still sleeping and snoring like a big child; only the rhythm had a subdued cadence. His house was on fire but he dreamt of only sparkling wine and lovely lassies.

Sundaram stirred him up, gently prodding him at the feet with his red flag.

CHAPTER XI

THE LOOT

(1)

The garden house of Chockalinga was the ancestral home of eleven generations of territorial magnates who had originally settled there as minor military chieftains, charged with the guardianship of the marches of Coleroon under the Nayak kings of Tanjore. Chockalinga's family had a singularly rare reputation for an unbroken line of prosperity, till darling Chockalinga himself arrived on the scene and began to squander the wealth and tradition of ages under the spell of youth and modern civilised life.

The secret of this prosperity lay in the rigid exclusiveness, and indifference to public work and welfare on the part of Chockalinga's ancestors, which resulted in an intense devotion to their own farm. And at last Chockalinga's absorbing interest in elections represented but the terrible

reaction to generations of single-minded worship of self-interest. And after all, this even prosperity of eleven generations is so repugnant to the sweet and native caprices of the Goddess Lakshmi who delights to roll like a wheel, the spokes of fortune ever descending and ascending.

(2)

The news of the collision at the Akkur railway station reached with the swiftness of a cyclone the ears of Chockalinga's aged mother while she was just about to retire to bed.

"Ramalinga, pray, run up to the station and see, for dear Chockalinga's sake."

Ramalinga was her own brother.

"No fear, Porkodi, Chockalinga is safe. It's the Tranquebar train that has smashed itself against a ballast. Our boy has gone to Mayavaram and he will be here in an hour in his Auburn Sedan."

"Collision, Ramalinga, it must be a dreadful thing! That is why I asked my boy never to work for these railway lines or metalled roads to our peaceful, pretty village homes. Our bulls are lying idle, like wild elephants, without work while the motor cars and the trains waste our hard-earned

wealth. Pray, Ramalinga, run up to the station and see if my boy is safe."

"No fear, sister, he is quite safe and will be here in half-an-hour."

"Ramalinga, why don't you tell my boy not to keep late hours like this and roam about doing other men's job and other people's elections for the idle name and fame of it. Our *pannai* is neglected, and even vegetables and pulses we have now to buy from the bazar—shame indeed! It would have brought tears to his father's eyes if he were alive to see in his own son's days one hundred *velis* still lying idle. This year at least Chockan must be married and made to settle down to the peace and sweetness of home life."

"Yes, Porkodi, you have spoken wisely like a true mother. Marry him to a proper girl, and everything will get settled of its own accord."

Ramalinga warmly approved of the idea. For he had a daughter of marriageable age and his one dream in life for several long years had been to get her married to his own nephew, Chockalinga. That was why he had been watching and plotting with infinite patience for one year in his sister's house.

"Ramalinga, our *pannai* which was the model for all in Chockan's father's days is now a by-word

of reproach to every passer-by. The *pannials* are crying for wages for three weeks and more—these poor fellows, how could they work in fields in sunshine and storm, day and night, if they are not fed? Chockan's father fed them well and every festive day in our home was a festive day for them as well. Our granaries were then full of all grains and pulses, and plantains and pumpkins rolled everywhere, and cocoanuts were mounded high as hillocks. Now the toddy-shop has come and ruined everything, and you can't get even one cocoanut to break before God Ganesha."

"That's so, Porkodi, the toddy-shop has weaned from work and thrift all our best men." Ramalinga nodded approval. For he was nearing sixty and still clung in common with his generation to some of the ancient Hindu ideas of piety and *dharma*.

"Ramalinga, in my days I have never known a single lean year even when famine raged all around. Chockan does not care for his mother's words, petted child that he has been. He has surely some respect for you. Why don't you tell him that he must soon mend his ways or our ancient *pannai* would share the fate of our cousin's at Sembarambakkam."

"Tell him these words only to lose the little respect I have! Your Nallan, the *maniam*, is his minister: these things, Porkodi, are never learnt except in the hard and bitter school of experience. Wed him to a proper girl, and your future as well as his is quite safe, and see how he and our *pannai* thrive. It all depends on the girl you pick for him."

"The girl I pick for him! What are you going to do, Ramalinga? Are you going to Benares at the time of your nephew's wedding? You must select the girl for him." Porkodi paused a moment, and then quietly added, "Why, I sometimes think that our *kutti* Neela, your daughter, will do for my boy—only she is too young and not very well grown up."

"Not well grown up, our Neela! At the proper age she will shoot up like a plantain tree: that was the way with her mother. No, no, sister, at the bottom of your heart you think we are all a poor lot. And true it's. But God has sent already a husband for every girl in our Tamil land." Ramalingam played the game very astutely and put up a very injured, shy and sensitive face.

"No, no, Ramalinga, don't take offence at nothing. None is dearer to me than my own Neela. But you must play the game boldly and

bring Chockan round. You know this half education and the spirit of the times has given him a lot of faery notions as to marriage. This twist of mind you should untwist. You must pull him up and bring him round. If that be God's will I shall call home Neela as my daughter-in-law next month." Porkodi spoke with warmth and decision.

"Yes, dear sister, Chockan is a fine boy; he won't go against your words in this matter though he may talk many strange things. Youth is like that always. Matrimony will bring him to the ancient moorings of our family. Let him dash hither and thither a little and see things for himself. That would teach him a lesson which he could really learn nowhere else."

"But, Ramalinga, he may be sucked deeper and deeper into the whirling stream of bad urban life, and everything lost like our cousin at Sembarambakkam—and at any time it may become too late to recapture a young mind." Porkodi spoke with the anxiety and the pulsing breath of a mother, and Ramalingam like one cleverly fishing in troubled waters. For he felt at the bottom of his heart that Porkodi would not really care for an alliance with him if it were all fair weather before her.

"You are joking, sister, and Sembarambakkam is

no parallel; for their lands are poor and the folk without prestige. But to waste three hundred *velis* at Akkur—it's impossible. Our *pannai* will stand half-a-dozen Chockans for six generations, no fear. Only this you must tell him firmly: that he should listen to my words a little more and give me some power to check and rule these unruly men in the *pannai*."

"Should he give you power, Ramalinga? As my brother you have the right to take it yourself. Tell me who dares to contradict you!"

"Well, then, if you think so I shall deal very differently and teach a lesson to Nallan and Amavasai, the granary-rats. They are the chief cause for the fall of our ancient *pannai* these three years, and Chockan listens to their soft and vile words of advice."

"Ramalinga, I tell you now, dear Chockan has wasted in elections, three lakhs in three years; take everything into your own hands and I should like to see my boy settled in life ere yet another month rolls by. This old body can't last for ever, and before I close my eyes in mortal sleep I must see Chockan married."

For the last twenty days two owls were screeching at nights from the lofty ruins of the pagoda of

a neglected Siva temple near-by, and its ominous shrill always carried terror to Porkodi's heart. The owls screeched again and wound up the auspicious words of Porkodi. She shuddered at the thought of some dire calamity to her ancient house. 'There was a dead silence for a moment. But Ramalinga was gracefully planning his own future and his daughter's.

Porkodi broke the tense silence and cried, "The screeching owls forbode some dire evil. Pray run up to the station, Ramalinga, and see my boy with your own eyes. The collision is a strange calamity in our land."

Before Ramalingam could give her a comforting answer there was a terrible uproar of shouts and cries in the beautiful walled-in quadrangle, wherein lay like giants in sleep twenty grain-heaps and hay-ricks high as hillocks.

(3)

"Who are the scoundrels there, raising this uproar at dead of night? Where is Nallan, the granary-rat? Still at the toddy-shop? And Amavasai, the *talayari*—to give these thieving, howling loots some fine thrashing."

Ramalingam roared, glad to avail himself of the chance that came so quickly to exercise his new-born power in Chockalinga's *pannai*. And he turned round to his sister with the air of a wise and experienced administrator, and remarked, "Nothing good will come to our *pannai* till one or two old bandicoots are sticked to death—Nallan, the pious thief and Amavasai, the *talayari*. Sister, I'll teach them all very soon a lesson with the lash."

But Porkodi was more absorbed in her own fears and in thoughts of her son's safety, especially after the ominous screech of the owls. The uproar increased in the granary and a thought flashed across her mind. She remembered vividly the audacious loot carried by her husband many years ago on a neighbouring village in which Nandan, Mookkan and Katteri earned their pensions. And every year they expected the loot in return.

"Ramalinga, the owl has not been screeching in vain these twenty nights. I feared some such calamity as this to our house. I think these are the dare-devils of Sorakkai Thevan, out to loot our granary and our village this night when my dear Chockan is away. Be quick, gather together all our brave fellows. Thank God that still Nandan,

Mookkan and Katteri are alive to teach these fellows the very lesson which they have taken fifty years to forget. Roll up your bed, Ramalinga, be quick; slip through the back door and call up all our *pallees* and *padayachees* and our valiant pariahs,—Nandan, Mookkan and Katteri; Irullan, Karuppan and Irullappan—the mere mention of their names and their footsteps will drive these fellows ten miles off. And Nallan and Amavasai are sure to be here somewhere near.”

Porkodi showed wonderful energy and agility at the ripe old age of seventy-two. Her commanding voice poured courage into the chicken heart of Ramalinga. Her tall and lean body still shone with the health and vigour of a pure life like the golden creeper in the bower, and amply justified her name, *Porkodi*.

But Porkodi's fears of a foreign raid were set at rest.

For fortunately Nallan and Amavasai bellowed reverentially at the top of their voices, humbly standing at the entrance to the granary, and thus saved Ramalinga an awkward run by the back-door with a palpitating heart to the *paracheri*.

“It's we, ah, mother, your humble and devoted Nallan and Amavasai, all our men are here, five

hundred strong, crying for wages; they are starving for the last twenty-one days. Pray, mother, master is away, order our wages. They have passed beyond my check or control."

"Wages! scoundrels, at dead of night! No, no, you have come to loot thinking us all asleep. I'll teach you such a lesson to-day that you'll never forget. Amavasai, you rogue, you are at the bottom of the whole mischief. I'll thrash you for it. And Nallan, you too are not doing your duty properly. A *talayari* and a *maniam* like you demanding wages at dead of night, I've not heard of, all my life anywhere! If only Chockan were here you all would be flayed alive! I must teach you all a lesson, now or never."

Ramalinga took a long lash in hand and ran in a rage of frenzy to thrash Amavasai who stood motionless, like a Greek God, in the infinite beauty of his bare brawn and muscle. Ramalinga raised the lash for a stroke on his back. But Karuppan who stood near-by, like a ghost, caught it finely just at the stroking time and pulled the owner to a stright fall at his feet. Ramalinga's head struck the stump of a cocoanut tree and he lay senseless there for a moment.

Porkodi roared in anger raising her cracked and

feeble voice to the summit of old, old authority at this unheard of indignity to her house. But her voice was not heard in the raging tumult, and her own household servants were thunder-struck and paralysed.

Katteri, the veteran hand at a hundred loots till now in all places except his own master's, discovered at last that the dividing line for the skill and courage of his hands was very thin indeed, and that the loyalty to the father did not and need not extend to the careless son, especially when the pension was in arrears for three months and more.

Katteri raised his voice to the clap of thunder and issued the marching orders for the night. "Anne, this is the hour for the poor *pariah*—it comes all too rarely, only once, half-an-hour in a long cycle of sixty years. These grain-heaps are the heaps gathered and mounded by our own hands. Our wives and children are starving at home these three weeks and our master is away. Let each carry home as much paddy as he needs."

Nandan and Mookkan cried, "Hurrah, young men, go by our leader and carry out his orders. Long live our tribal gods for this hour of plenty! Long live our Katteri!"

The authority to loot was passed in the sacred voice of their own leaders. That was as good as God's own command to these loyal, simple tillers of the soil.

Irullan, Karuppan and Irullappan, the most reckless and courageous of the younger leaders, shouted: "Set fire to the hay-ricks. Let the voice of the poor go raging up to Heaven in flames, burning the sin and injustice of ages, and bring down the thunder of God on the head of this *pannai*. Our wives and children are starving while our master is making merry elsewhere, feasting in a royal way all the little urban hirelings, and underlings in official belts."

The voices united in the chorus-cry of plunder were grim and terrible and seemed to emit the pent-up fire and hate of ages.

An agrarian mob, unleashed by hunger in the throbbing hour of riot and loot, rages, leaps and dances like a vast lake that has broken its ancient bunds in the creative monsoon hour.

Nallan saw with dismay the turn things were taking under his overruled leadership. He cried with all the authority of the *maniam*: "Do anything you choose, fellows, in this fateful hour of madness, but don't set fire to the hay-ricks, the food

of the dumb cattle. Loot the grain-heaps, if you please, and carry home, as Katteri says, as much as you can but don't touch a bundle of straw." But his cry and warning voice came too late.

For already 'a crackling, slender, shining fuse of fire was girdling, like summer lightning, round the black bosom of a hay-rick standing high as an elephant. Soon fire was everywhere raging, like high winds in a cyclone.

And Ramalingam was eye-witness to all this tragic scene in his own house, though he was not allowed a vertical view of the splendour. For he was held tight to the ground by the powerful hands of Karuppan who owed him some grudge and kept on muttering: "You too have come here only to eat the salt of our master. Then why all this command and bluff?"

The *pannai* used the labour of five hundred families, and, all told, with women and children, it came to two thousand souls or stomachs depending for their sustenance on Chockalinga's capricious moods. In this dark hour lit by the lurid, strange light of burning grain-heaps and hay-ricks, two thousand hands, young and old, male and female, worked at the terrible thing called plunder and loot. Everyone put forth the giant strength of

hungry ghosts. All the grain-heaps and hayricks disappeared in half-an-hour, half by loot and half by fire.

Nallan wistfully gazed in impotent rage and a thought flashed across his mind and he cried: "And someone to the toddy-shop, our curse, and the cause of all this woe to my dear master. Let us begin a new life from to-morrow." Pavadai ran with a band of youngsters and set fire to the toddy-shop. And a sister light soon shone meekly but clearly at a distance. It twinkled like the spiritual rays from the stars.

Kandan came running breathless but, alas, quite too late. He ran like a wounded hare, round and round the raging grain-heaps and hay-ricks. And Nallan prostrated before him and asked for forgiveness, "Great Kanda, this is not the work of man, but the act of God—a breath of wind and a spark of fire from the heavens. We have had no thought of fire or plunder, and came only to ask for wages, long in arrears. But somehow it has ended like this in the twinkling second of a lightning thought. We don't know—who, how or why."

Kandan stood motionless and speechless gazing in bewilderment at the two thousand looting hands, young and old, crowding, hurrying and carrying

home with throbbing hearts plundered food amidst the raging flames. The scene was too tragic for him to stay longer and he retraced his steps slowly to the Akkur railway station, Nallan slowly following him some distance. Kandan knew at once that there were terrible things ahead for him to face.

But the loot continued in all the infinite fury of the hunger of ages, and the chance that comes all too rarely once in a generation. This down-trodden race of pure tillers of the soil, with their feet ever in the mire of ignorance and poverty, are weak like the crouching tiger in day-time but are the most fierce and courageous in the dark and ghostly hour of loot.

Amavasai and Nallan, driven between two deep loyalties, stood like a ship caught in a tempest between two rocks.

But Nandan, Mookkan and Katteri; Irullan, Karuppan and Irullappan were gay and busy giving orders to their men, and singing to the music of the fire the purest songs of pleasure.

CHAPTER XII

THE DAWN

(1)

The darkness of the tragic night was over. The first faint streaks of dawn were stealthily and softly spreading over the eastern sky. It was a lovely dawn at Akkur.

The rising sun in all the impersonal glory and innocence of its innate splendour, and in ignorance of the tragic deeds overnight on this little planet, rose and moved above the circling clouds like a mandarin from his velvet bed and silken sheets. It benignly cast its first rays on Akkur, and did not seem to weep for the woes that had set in, all on a sudden, on the ancient house of Chockalinga. The hay-ricks and the grain-heaps high as hillocks that peeped and smiled at the morning sun from generation to generation reared no more their heads in gracious nods of welcome. The riches that gave the charm to Mr. Mudaliar's gay outlook on

life were charred and reduced to mere heaps of coal-black ashes on which the sportive wind played and scattered even the last traces of the ruin.

The garden house of Chockalinga, once gay and proud with the mellow ease of eleven generations of aristocratic peace and plenty, now looked the very picture of ruin, as if a clap of thunder had struck it in a tragic moment.

But hundreds of cottages ten miles around sang merrily the song of plenty with the heartiness of assured food for six months. But it was a song touched with a deep and hidden note of fear. The secret joy of stolen plenty was mixed with the acid tremor of anxiety. For, taking Nature's fruits, just for the moment caught in the hands of another, even to appease your own cruel calls of hunger, is the first crime against the sacred institution of property: the first of virtues in the animal kingdom becomes the first of sins in the ancient code of man.

(2)

The dawn saw the station yard itself thronged to the full. The terrors of the night, the collision and the fire, told on every one. The railway

station premises was instinctively thought of as the protector of all, as it linked the whole village with the world. The morning air was keen, and it refreshed the weary eyes that never closed in sleep the previous night.

Soon there was a rumbling sound on the railway track. No. 5 with a new engine came stealing into the station punctually with a significant look, as it carried the transferred traffic from the Ceylon Boat Mail.

The Deputy Collector of Mayavaram too travelled by the same train, as he thought it prudent to take in hand at once the new Collector even from the Mayavaram railway station. The vexed question of his promotion was pending settlement next quarter.

Of course Rangan and Rajeswari too travelled by the same train. The scheduled stopping time at Akkur was just a minute.

But the collision and the fire and the Assistant Collector were events. Besides, the Collector should have the time to take his morning coffee. Rangan, nothing at Egmore, was everything at Akkur; because in a wise moment he had sent beforehand a telegram from Madras to the Deputy Collector at Mayavaram intimating his arrival.

(3)

"Mr. Mudaliar, why so early at the station? Did the collision reach your ears and disturb your sleep?" asked his friend, the Deputy Collector, unaware of the tragic part played by this local magnate in the collision. "You look also very much wearied; evidently you had no sleep overnight." This poor Deputy Collector, well versed in audit to the last pie of the *kist*, and in all paper transactions, and the ablest hand at drafting revenue notes, had no idea of the extraordinary powers for sleep of Mr. Mudaliar.

"Nothing, sir, only some mischief has been played on me during my absence last evening, as I had feared so long. Kandan of whom I spoke to you is the cause of the trouble; he is the arch-enemy of myself and your Government, sir. He is stirring these poor tillers of the soil to walk the path of fire, disturbing the peace and order of ages. Providence has sent you now most unexpectedly to my help. Look yonder, sir, all my hay-ricks and grain-heaps once high as hillocks were burnt down yesternight, twenty thousand *kalams* of paddy, all burnt or looted. Nay, I won't be sorry if all were burnt down, an offering to the

God of fire for my sins in this and all my past lives. But this plunder by the hands of my own men who have eaten my salt for ages! With your help, sir, I propose to whip them till they disgorge every grain from their hiding places, in their huts, or in their stomachs!"

Mr. Mudaliar was allowed the full length of his lament. For the Deputy Collector kept on gazing at the excited crowd.

"Arson, that is the crowd for, I suppose: it is a serious offence under the Penal Code. Who did it actually, I wonder? Kandan at the bottom of this serious offence? Are you sure of it, Mr. Mudaliar? For all his culture and creed of non-violence, would he have stirred it himself? He might have preached some vague socialistic theories. But this burning of grain and hay-ricks, so dear to cattle and men, would he have been a direct party to loot, plunder and fire? He talks sedition, there is no doubt about it; all his words and talks breathe fire and brimstone and he has a determined will."

Mr. Mudaliar interrupted in haste and said, "Kandan looks calm and gentle but he is full of sparks of fire like the *vanni* tree, and the slightest friction sets free the flame within."

"But it seems to me impossible, Mr. Mudaliar, that he has had a hand in this atrocious arson and plunder. In all my official life for twenty years this is the biggest loot I have known, twenty thousand *kalams* of paddy looted and burnt down in a single night; impossible to believe my eyes or ears!"

"But I'm sure, sir, that he is at the bottom of it all. It appears that even last evening at the toddy-shop he was inciting my men to do the final act of revenge to wipe out, as he fondly says often, the debt and sin of ages."

"In any event, if you are so sure of it, as you say you are, Mr. Mudaliar,—now that the new Collector *dorai* is here with us in the train on his way to Tranquebar, let us beg of him to stay for an hour in your garden-house and take his breakfast. Let him see the ruin all for himself, as no witness could so well convey it to him as his own eyes. That would indeed strengthen my hands to deal firmly with Kandan."

The Deputy Collector paused a moment and said in a really serious tone, "Kindly remember, Mr. Mudaliar, Kandan is no joke or trifle to play with. I understand he is very influentially supported, and he has friends all over; Madras, Delhi, and even

London. And Mahatmaji is a great friend of Kandan. However we shall invite the new Collector *dorai*, and feel the way."

"With pleasure, sir, it is double luck for me for the day then. Let the Collector come and stay with me not for one hour but for the whole year, and I'll make the garden-house fit to receive him."

"Very well, then, Mr. Mudaliar, you've the Auburn car ready with you now?"

"Well, there it is, ready to start at your wish."

A little far away from the entrance under the rising mound and shade of a cocoanut tree stood the Auburn car in all its pristine glory of colour in the radiant morning sun. An urchin, as if he had overheard the conversation, blew the bellowing horn once, twice, thrice for the sheer joy of it.

The Deputy Collector with his awkward gait and shuffling trousers—the only occasion on which he draped himself in his old age in the European style to please his masters, moved fast like a circus elephant, to where Rangan and Rajeswari were seated in the train, to explain the trifling change in the programme

"May it please your honour, I understand that the arrangements at Tranquebar are not yet ready to receive your honour and her ladyship in proper

style. May it please you to breakfast here at Akkur. This is Mr. Chockalinga Mudaliar, the President of the Taluk Board and a member of the District Board, and the leading *mirasdar* of this Taluk. He owns about two thousand acres and pays the heaviest *kist* in our Taluk, if not in the whole District. He has a beautiful garden house near-by. Your honoured self and her ladyship may rest a while there after the hard journey overnight. Then in the evening we may all go to Tranquebar by the Auburn Sedan."

"We are entirely in your hands, Mr. Deputy Collector," Rangan uttered the words loftily, swallowing half of them in a splendid yawn, though the capacious mouth of Rangan frightened Rajeswari a little.

The Deputy Collector turned to Sundaram who was standing near-by reverentially.

"Then, station-master, you may send out the train. We go by car to Tranquebar."

Rangan and Rajeswari gladly got down from the train, and moved towards the exit, fussed about by liveried peons in front. Rangan innocently took the crowd as having come to pay their respects to the new Collector even at so early dawn. He already thought that the Deputy Collector though

very unpromising in his appearance like himself was a capable man, and a man of deeds, not words.

(4)

"Is it you, Kanda? What a rare delight to see you even before we have set our feet in your place. We were just thinking of you in the Boat Mail, and our very thoughts have indeed brought you here to station," Rajeswari greeted Kandan before they had advanced even a few steps from the train. Rajeswari's eagle eyes caught Kandan in the crowd, and Kandan's presence could be missed nowhere.

"Is it you, Rajee? Impossible to believe my own eyes!" exclaimed Kandan in wonder half extricating himself from the crowd.

There was a smile of calm and spreading joy in Kandan's face quite vying with the tranquil charm of the early dawn. And Rajeswari stood rooted to the spot full of sap—the old, old love flooding her bosom like mountain floods that fill the river valleys in the fulfilling monsoon hour, foaming and churning, lipping and eddying, and moving even rocks and trees on the way.

"Is it you, Kanda? What a pleasure to meet you so unexpectedly!" Rangan exclaimed with

sincerity. For, the memory of many fine days spent together at Oxford before they met Rajeswari on a fateful day on a common platform came to him in a flood. Rangan shook hands with Kandan to the wonder of the crowd and the dismay of Mr. Mudaliar. They even went to the unusual length of a hearty half-embrace. There was such a look of final ease and tranquillity about Kandan that even Rangan's materialistic mind felt its charm and influence.

For sincerity carries with it the healing touch of the gods. It is the very amber from which the first electrons of a spiritual life are generated. It is the focussing lens of life—the base of all *Yoga* that leads to final communion with the All-knowing.

It was a critical moment for Sundaram. Rangan's face had a strange, far-off familiar look. He ran to his hut. "Sarasu, it seems to me your brother,—the new Collector just arrived. You know I've seen him but once for less than an hour now many years ago. Come out and see."

Sarasvati came out with a palpitating heart. She had not seen her brother now for nearly five years, and not heard from him at all for three. She moved like a fairy queen to the station-yard. All eyes were

turned to her. Rangan made her out at once. A false moment of pride just stood in the way for a fleeting second. But the glory of Sarasvati's full-blown beauty and her lofty looks of virgin grace cleared the ground for recognition. The brother's love triumphed immediately over the Collector's pride. He greeted her warmly with eyes glowing with fraternal love.

"Sarasu, forgive me for these many years of lapse and neglect. I feel it now a crime; I haven't even written to you these years."

"Dear Ranga, should you write to me? A brother's love is brother's love with or without pen and ink and postage. It's enough you have remembered me. Not a day passed without my thinking of you and of our dear father and mother who haven't lived long enough to see you so high in life."

"It is our ill-luck. Are you here, dear Sarasu, waiting for the train?"

"I'm always here, waiting for trains."

"I don't understand you."

"I'm the wife of the station-master of Akkur."

Sarasvati did not drop her eyelids or wrinkle her brow. There was a firm and decided majesty in her voice.

Rangan was covered with confusion for a moment. But he quickly added, hiding his feelings very cleverly, "You'll be no more that, dear Sarasu. I'm proud of you. You have blossomed like the lotus in this mire of life around you, and the little pond of my family is proud of you. Would my mother could come back to-day, if only to see the pearl of you for a second! I'm blessed in a sister like you, dear Sarasu."

Rangan and Sarasvati moved on together. Kandan and Rajee followed them silently with thoughts of their own. Slowly they reached the Auburn car waiting for them like a state elephant.

To Rajeswari's surprise Ponnann too was standing near the stately bonnet of the Auburn Sedan, gracefully and humbly bowing to all the four. To Sarasvati's surprise Kamakshi too was following her. Such was the bond of friendship forged overnight while tending together Karian's wife.

"What, Ponna, you too have got down at Akkur. Why not at Tranquebar?" Rajeswari asked.

"Madam, hereafter my life is cast with you. I'm your humble servant in the national cause. Even if you reject me, spurn me, I must die only at your feet and take my salvation therefrom."

Faithful Ponnann was made the fifth and Kamakshi

the sixth. All the six drove to Mr. Mudaliar's house racing at forty miles an hour. For the road was beautifully metalled and in excellent condition. If not at least that, what is a President of the Taluk Board worth who has under his control a lakh of rupees earmarked for metalling roads in the Taluk?

As for the Deputy Collector and Mr. Mudaliar, they followed the illustrious guests to the car, gracefully nodding approval at every step all the way, and wondering at Kandan's amazing turn of luck and Sarasvati's beauty. They stood behind for a second trip in the car—and they had plenty of time to explain and adjust this mystery tale of wonder about Rangan and Sarasvati.

Sundaram acted as the interpreter of this mystic story, being Sarasvati's wedded lord. He claimed before the unbelieving audience that the new Collector was his own brother-in-law. As for Kandan he spun as good a story as possible piecing of things together would make, that they were perhaps friends at college in London.

But Kandan's intimacy with the new Collector seemed to Mr. Mudaliar the death-knell to all his fond hopes of revenge and destruction. Still the Deputy Collector cheered him with a whispered word that the initiative in these matters of peace

and order lay with him, and that the British touch to the Indian Penal Code made the law of the land no respecter of persons. Law would take its own unswerving course; of course, eventually for the benefit of the great Mr. Mudaliar, the lord of two thousand acres and the leading *mirasdar* of the Taluk who paid the heaviest *kist* to the Government.

Besides, the Deputy Collector's only daughter's marriage was fixed the next fortnight and Mr. Mudaliar's co-operation would be invaluable in conducting to a fine success this heavy, taxing social function.

Is it not that in such touching mutuality life's most sacred record of intimate pleasures are secreted like honeycombs in inaccessible rock-crevices in high ranges of hills?

Mr. Mudaliar lavished with the easy spendthrift strokes of a born nobleman, the wealth, gathered grain by grain with ant-like industry, by hundreds of his own *pannaials* in the mud and mire of the fields.

What does it matter to an impersonal divinity that choice flowers distil the honey from the dew by a mysterious process still unknown to the gods, that bees roam for miles to gather the honey drop by drop with infinite toil, and at last bring

together this intricate work of worship to the Sun-God, and build the honeycomb amidst sun-lit rocks, patted by the roaming wind, blessed by the murmuring brook and kissed by the stars ; all only to be broken at the end by the heavy and plundering footsteps of man ?

CHAPTER XIII

TRANQUEBAR, THE QUEEN OF THE COROMANDEL COAST

(1)

Tranquebar, the Queen of the Coromandel Coast, is now but an old, dilapidated lady, with a face wrinkled with the ruin of ages. But she must have been once a thing of beauty, judging from the shapely and bird-like outlines of her features.

Tranquebar is finely situated at the mouth of the river Veerasholan on a rising ground of sand-dunes right on the very edge of the sea and the foam of the waves. Cocoanut gardens, mango groves and banana plantations grow luxuriantly, throwing all over a solemn shade of green when the noon-day sun sparkles on the glittering sea.

Tranquebar has a history that goes back two thousand years to the spacious days of King Karikalan. It then marked the extreme southern limits of the ancient city of Puhar which lay ten miles square, like a mighty eagle that had spread

its wings on the ground just before its final flight to the sky.

Tranquebar has a special fame for its climate. It is peculiarly healthy as the breeze comes from the herb-laden hills of Jaffna and Ceylon, twisting and rolling over miles of sea.

The Danish in their brief hour of power built a fort three hundred years ago on the foreshore lashed by the very waves they had ridden over, dolphin-like, on the sea. The fort has an antique appearance. It now stands slightly remodelled for use as a rest-house for the less valorous but better paid army of administrative officials. And it was placed by special orders now for one week at the exclusive use of Rangan, the new Assistant Collector.

(2)

It was the fifth day after their arrival, and only a couple of days more remained for Rangan to join duty at Tanjore as Assistant Collector. But his state of mind was indescribable. Rajeswari Bai had quietly resolved to proceed in her own way, unmoved by the pitiful entreaties of Rangan not to walk the path of fire. She pleaded the cause of the country with such sincerity and courage that the patriotic call went home direct to his heart.

But it was painful to Rangan to make the sacrifice it meant, especially after having tasted the sweets of office for a couple of years. Could he heroically, at the bidding of the love of his heart, put an end voluntarily to a career that might end in a Governorship some day? And even in this struggle of mind his love for Rajeswari doubled itself, if only for the pathetically strong attachment Rajeswari and Sarasvati had developed for each other in the short space of five days, and the love for the freedom of the Motherland they both felt so intensely.

The sea breeze had set in very early that day even at two. The waves were slowly gaining ground. The mid-day lull of the sea was over. The old Danish fort was standing in all its antique glory just in front of the sea, as if waiting patiently for a rare note of music from the restless blue waters. It seemed also to stand in a pensive mood as if watching thoughtfully for a chance to complete its interrupted history.

The crabs were moving quickly to and fro on the shore, backwards and forwards, up and down, from land to sea and from sea to land. The waves went on with their ceaseless work, washing the sands of the shore in lispingsh worship and polishing

them into marble shapes of beauty, and filling the crab-holes with bubbling spouts of water.

To the south lay the Veerasholan with a mile stretch of sand for its mouth in the monsoon time of plenty. But now the river was a slender blue ribbon of salt water that ran from sea to land winding up like a serpent.

The breeze was full and blowing in gusts. The old creaking windows and doors of the Danish fort were jamming against their framework and rusty hinges as if longing for the freedom of the wind and the sea. The glass panes shivered in the wild breeze and trembled for their very lives. The big open quadrangle of the fort lay in the very middle of the walled-in space and gave a luxurious look of opulence to this old building of three hundred years, now bandaged here and there with new belts of cement.

The fort is full of low-celled rooms, and the ceiling in many places almost grazes the head with a touch of humility. But there is one fascinating turret hung aloft in the sky to which daring lads climb for a full view of Nature all around,—an open turret to which you go meandering amidst cracked domes. It is the proper spying place, serene and lovely, to catch the sea and the river in all their

naked beauty in their bathing, mingling hours of love.

(3)

It was five o'clock in the evening and the sun had already declined far into the west and was very near setting. Rangan and Sarasvati were in the open turret. Kandan and Rajeswari were on the level sand in the ever-disputed frontier between the land and the sea. They were standing at ease with the waves gently laving their feet.

Kandan broke the lisping murmur of the sea in a pensive voice. "Rajee, there's no doubt that there is a divinity that shapes our ends. The seeming woes of the day carry within them the weal for the morrow. In the most tragic hour of my life when I thought everything was lost, my freedom, my name, my work, and sure I was doomed, your miraculous appearance has saved me. Rangan has saved my body and you my—."

"You feared the arson would be put on your head—even now anything may happen if Rangan resigns his job."

"Rangan resigns his job! You mean it, Rajee?"

"Yes, I've asked him to—he may and join us in the noble work that awaits us all. Kanda, I

learnt to value you only after you left us at London,—so grave, wistful and loving that memories of you came flooding along in happy reminiscence. The loss to the Civil Service is only the greater and truer gain of India. Such a birth as yours is a blessing to my poor and bleeding Motherland."

"There are, Rajee, hundreds and thousands of such workers like myself in this country—the unknown volunteer who has risked his life and liberty in the struggle for Swaraj when the call of the Mother came. Mine is therefore nothing but a response to the common call in the air. But yours, Rajee, is the finest thing in the history of our chequered land. How aristocratic ladies like you, fed in luxury, have felt the call of the Mother and sacrificed everything for it! That's truly selfless and rare."

"Kanda, our work is nothing compared with yours. We simply follow the beaten track in towns, cheered to the echo by the mob and praised to the skies by head-lines in the press—and that rewards the grateful heart. But yours is the work of the saint, lofty, detached, lonely, courting no publicity and rating selfless work its own and only reward. And then you work at the very base of Indian life,

the village, clearing the slime and silt of ages by diving deep and risking life, while we simply work at the top lazily gathering together the urban scum and the foam that floats thereon. Accept me as your slave, eager co-worker, that I may spend the rest of my life ever with you and at your feet."

Kandan was deeply moved by the glowing tribute and the sincerity of her words. "I must say these words, now or never, Rajee; words that come welling deep from my heart. I've been reading in the papers of your fine courage and sacrifice at Bombay—little did I dream that you would so soon be so near me—can you measure me now, how proud and tall I feel! Little do you know—for it's a secret with my Maker,—even this little work I'm doing here is your chance gift to me—"

"My gift!"

"Yes, your gift, Rajee, devoted work for a sacred public cause comes not to all and sundry—unless one's soul is stirred by some sublime stir. And Rajee, you remember those fervent days of mine—"

A rolling, eddying, tumbling wave of the sea came trembling all the way from the mid-ocean and kissed the foam-embroidered feet of Rajee.

A slight flush reddened her cheeks.

"When I was head over ears in love with you,

dear Rajee, when every nerve of my being sang the strange music of the gods, and the common flesh was tingling with the creative joy of life, and when I knew that you could not return it, though you pitied me for my seeming virtues,—virtues that never go to bring a lady to a man's feet, as you yourself so gently hinted;—the words are still ringing, for they have made my future life on this earth,—Rangan drew you so well to himself with his fine speeches—it seemed for a day as if I would go mad, and indeed I was so for a day.”

Rajee was so profoundly absorbed in the story that she did not mind even a dashing wave which had nearly drenched them both with the bitter salt-sea flood.

“But, thanks to my forefathers, and thanks to you who stirred me with the sublime churn of love, like the mist before the rising sun all my thoughts of disappointed love for you turned in a magic night into a solemn and consecrated love for my Motherland. I at once resolved to sail for India after a fortnight's stay in Natal. The I.C.S. without you seemed to me the poorest thing in the world—and I threw it up as a shameful memory—Rangan and myself would have never cared to sit for the I.C.S.—we were meant for the law—but

for love of you, that we might try each our chance to win your aristocratic love. So, Rajee, once again life seemed sweeter to me mixed with the sweet dreams of unrest. I've ever since worked every day with joy, with grateful thoughts and sweet memories of you. In the star-lit sky under the ever-fresh and wind-swept sand-dunes, sweetest thoughts of you pillowed me every night to sleepless sleep."

Kandan sank on the wet sand almost exhausted with the deep emotion that these thoughts stirred in him.

"Well, dear Kanda, sometimes we treasure the very things we have first been careless about, after we've lost them for ever. Well, these very thoughts of you must have brought me all the way from the Arabian sea to Tranquebar, your own native city. I'm sure, I felt similarly, though Rangan still clings to me,—and I to him in a way—"

"Rangan still only clings to you!"

To hear from her own lovely lips that she was not married yet gave him a strange relief and a central freedom to the soul. Not that he hoped that Rajee would ever become his own, but it was something that Rajee was still free as a bird to sing a song of her own and flutter as she chose.

"The love of the Mother, Kanda, the grand passion for my country has filled my being and flooded my heart night and day, like the sea that goes ebbing and flowing in this little creek at the mouth of the river. I must work for the freedom of my country first; for which I must have my own freedom. This's the most fateful time, now or never."

"These are just my thoughts as well, Rajee. I've consecrated my life for the service of the country, in your own holy name, and I repeat the vow at your feet in the solemn presence of this wide ocean and in the glory of the setting sun."

And Kandan stood mute for a while as if lost in prayer, in communion with the All-High, and then slowly turned on his feet to the west as if to see the glory of the setting sun. He saw Rangan and Sarasvati standing in the open turret of the fort.

"Look yonder, Rajee, turn this side. Rangan and Sarasvati seem like Liliputians from that lofty height of the open turret. And Sarasvati has a star-like beauty—"

"Rather say a moon-like beauty—and Sarasvati shines softly so much like the moon, and Rangan is so nearly like the cloud in the moon—"

"Yes, Rajee, how unlike they are for brother and sister!"

"Yes, how unlike they are—a very mild way, Kanda, of stating facts that stare one in the face."

Rajee's eyes beamed with a strange lustre.

"But Sarasvati is a wonder to us in many ways, Kanda. The Feminine has reached perfection in her: gentle and sweet as a fawn in play but decided and powerful in her views and work. There's a mysterious charm in her voice and a cosmic quiet in her eyes. There is a healing touch in her hands and a rhythmic song in the air she breathes. It's the result of a perfect cycle of lives, devoted, pure and true. She's just the Eternal Feminine that would go to make causes great by a mere look of the eyes and keep the freedom of man from being sold. She has given me an angel's strength by her nod."

Kandan and Rajeswari were already feeling a friendship far greater and nobler than the tie that love of the flesh twists in its most glorious hour. They were already feeling the spiritual bond of a higher union as if they both belonged to some ancient *sanyasin* order working for the uplift of the fallen race of man.

"Dear Kanda, have you scanned her looks?"

There's a floating liquid roll of sadness in her eyes—tears that well up for the joy of expression but refuse to roll down her lotus-cheeks like drops of pearls."

"Years of solitude, Rajee, have given her a mystic power of awe and vision and this pensiveness of the other world is but part of that."

"But I think, Kanda, that there's also a touch of earthly sorrow from which springs this spiritual flower of her soul."

"Yes, you are right, with the instinct of your sex."

"In her face, Kanda, there are the beams of a virgin glory and freshness, hard and very strange to understand. But this reserve and holy conservation has given her the charm of angels and the strength of gods, the higher power."

"Yes, Rajee, you are perfectly right; you have shown a marvellous intuition into the sources of power of one of the most mysterious and beautiful women I've known. She is, as you say, one of those rare and saintly souls who need employ no speech to convert others to a creed or a cause, but just a look from their eyes will make heroes of common clay. Rajee, if only you and Sarasvati work together for the country's cause, who can resist our march to freedom?"

"Yes, only I'd make a slight amendment and add your name."

Rajee smiled one of her bewitching gracious smiles, and Kandan's heart heaved in floods of emotion from sea to land and from land to sea.

(4)

Ponnan approached Kandan and Rajeswari in solemn, measured steps, roughing the sands as if counting the grains like a serious child that was just having its allotted five minutes for play. Ponnan was now their trusted servant especially after his relationship with Kandan was verified. All suspicions of him were set at rest.

Ponnan took out a telegram from his pocket and asked, "Where's the Collector *dorai*, madam ? Here's a telegram for him."

"Collector *dorai*, Ponna, has disappeared in the sky as a star. Please give it to me, and look up," Rajeswari spoke in jest.

She tore open and read the telegram. Kandan for a while stood watching the crowding fury of the waters as if they mirrored the deep tumult and unrest of his own heart and of all life on the land.

The telegram read :

“RANGASWAMI, I.C.S.

Tranquebar.

Transferred as Assistant Settlement Officer to Palni. Join forthwith.”

Rajeswari Bai jumped for joy like a child.

“Kanda, there’s already prophecy in my words. I foretold it to Rangan. I don’t believe he would still think of going out as a Settlement Officer, tamely measuring mountain slopes while he ought to be fighting for his Motherland. Rangan, as a friend, is a weak soul full of sophistry, rugged metaphors and wild similes. As a fighter, British Raj will find in him a foeman worthy of its steel.”

Kandan exclaimed in incredulous tones, “Impossible to believe this telegram! Rangan to be degraded into a Settlement Officer for no reason, and all on a sudden. Impossible, unless it be that a faithful report of all our conversation is being telegraphed to the Government of Madras every evening.”

Ponnan stood impatiently digging the sand with his right toe and restlessly crushing his palm as if in respectful prayer for orders from his employer. He ventured to ask for Rangan in a submissive tone, “Where’s the Collector *dorai*, madam?”

"Ponna, there he is in the open turret—look aloft. Take this to him. But he is no more the Collector *dorai* though you may continue to call him so."

Rajeswari smiled rejoicingly and Kandan shared a little of it but asked seriously, when Ponna had left, "Rajee, are you sure Ponna is our faithful servant, and not a spy from Madras?"

"Kanda, you say you have since traced your relationship with him through your mother and his statements are found quite true."

"Somehow I don't like his looks—there is a sly trickish twinkle in his eyes. We must watch him a little more carefully and keenly."

"His looks were worse, and he is improving quickly, gazing in wonder at Sarasvati and slowly changing under her magnetic spell."

"At any rate, we must watch him a little more carefully."

"A very cousinly feeling!"

(5)

Ponna quickly covered the level stretch of sand and was half way to the fort. But he had another telegram in his pocket in code words. He must destroy it immediately. For the very good news it contained he wanted to read it once more before

he consigned it to the fire. So he took it out cautiously, and it ran as follows:

"Promoted for excellent work, by fifty rupees. Continue watching movements and send full reports. If, as you say, Mr. Mudaliar too is likely to join, and Rangaswami dislikes the transfer and thinks of resigning, wire at once."

Though it was in code words Ponnann did not consider it safe to keep it himself. He saw the fresh water well on the foreshore near the fort and no one drawing water for the moment. He tore the telegram to bits and sent them flying down the well.

He looked aloft and fancied that Rangan and Sarasvati had seen him in the act.

A bead of perspiration came rolling down his forehead and gathered into a little drop on his eyebrow. Ponnann hurried up the narrow flight of steps to deliver the other telegram to his master. But Ponnann while ascending the winding steps amidst the cracked domes had a strange thought about the fresh water well so near the sea.

Why is the well so near the sea ever so full of fresh water? Is it like the thoughts and deeds of good men even when they are always surrounded by bad people?

Why is the sea ever so saltish even though hundreds of rivers pour their sweet, fresh waters into it every hour of the day? Is it quite like himself?

But this reverie was broken by the sharp voice of Kamakshi who, emerging from the other side of a lofty dome, asked in a tone of reprimand, "Ponna, what did you throw into that drinking well? Some secret letter of yours? Don't you know that this is the only fresh water well in the whole fort? What did you throw into the well? Won't you tell me?"

Ever since they met each other on the platform of the Akkur railway station, Ponnai and Kamakshi were irresistably feeling drawn to each other, and already they had developed a great mutual tenderness.

While Ponnai definitely attached himself to Rangan, Kamakshi, the orphan girl without a home, at last found in Sarasvati's kindness a temporary resting place for her body and mind.

"What did I throw into the well? Nothing, sweet Kamakshi, nothing that would foul the fresh water. Shall I tell you—only if you won't be angry with me—shall I tell you, a love-letter that I dared not crush into your tender hands in some secret hour—so I threw it into the well so that it

might sweeten the water that you may drink and thus pour its love-laden song into your soul."

Ponnan drew audaciously from his imagination, but in the sentiment of love he so tenderly expressed towards Kamakshi, he was thoroughly sincere. Kamakshi had a bird-like beauty and charm all her own, somewhat heightened by the lonely looks of her lotus eyes, a little frosted by secret tears.

Kamakshi drooped her long-lashing eyelids and by way of breaking the embarrassment asked, "The telegram in hand, Ponna,—is it for the Collector *'durai'*?"

"Yes, for the Collector, sweet Kamakshi. I'll run up like a squirrel, deliver it in a second—pray, wait a minute."

Meanwhile, Kandan and Rajeswari were speculating how Rangan would receive this news of transfer, whether he would view it at all as a mark of degradation.

"I rather think, Rajee, that Rangan won't easily give up the job, taking a sentimental view of things. You know that the I.C.S. is a little kingship, and its atmosphere knows not the common depression, stress and storm of our humble lives."

"Then, you say, Kanda, that he would give us up and join duty as a Settlement Officer and do

penance on the Palni Hills to promote his patriotism! It's hard for me to believe it of Rangan, though I know he is not made of the heroic stuff of which men, like you, are made. But the third-class ticket adventure at Egmore has bitten into his soul. It's often trifles that derail a mighty mind in motion. Besides, Sarasvati is a new factor. She is a first-class patriot and an organising genius of the first order; and for aught I know she won't allow her gifted brother to bear the benumbing rule of red-tapes and flags. Nor will I, if I still count for anything at all in his eyes."

"Yes, Rajee, you are the decisive factor, I forgot all about it. Now I'm sure he will give up the job at once. Look up, Rajee, they are coming down in splendid haste full of meaning and freedom in their movements—and Ponnan is flying for life—what's the matter?"

Yes, Ponnan was running at top speed to the post-office near-by with a sheet of paper in his hand.

"I'm sure, Kanda, he is telegraphing his resignation."

Rangan came running to the shore shouting like a child who has changed a cake for a toy, "I've Rajee, kicked up the d—d thing by wire just now."

Your words are indeed quite prophetic—Settlement Officer on Palni Hills! I fear that it's not Ponnai but you, the spy in the C. I. D., fully in the know of the secrets of this wonderful Government."

"Yes, yes, the secrets to make heroes of civilians and patriots of magistrates," Rajee responded laughing.

Hardly these words had been uttered, when the stately Auburn Sedan came hooting and racing to the sea-shore, flying like a sea-bird over the spacious and beautiful *maidan* that lies to the north of the fort, the very soul of Tranquebar.

Chockalinga alighted first; then Sundaram and Karian followed him humbly.

"Collector *dorai*, I've come to beg a favour of you: to intercede on our behalf with the railway authorities. Karian and Sundaram, two of my finest friends, have been dismissed from service as a result of the collision for which I was alone responsible, by running the train before time. Pray, move in the matter, Collector *dorai*—you have my life-long gratitude."

"I'm no more the Collector, Mr. Mudaliar, no more than you. I have resigned the job feeling the call of the country. Leading *mirasdars*, like you, should help us at this critical hour when a new

and a great India is being made." Rangan had already begun his full service to the country with his eloquent tongue.

"Yes, Mr. Mudaliar, you too should join us as the scion of an ancient house and as the natural leader of these men," Rajeswari spoke with moving sincerity.

Sarasvati spoke not but stood motionless yet vivid like an *ambhal* in an ancient shrine. She seemed to focus on Mudaliar her calm collected eyes that were pools of tranquillity, as if in earnest spiritual entreaty for the cause of the great Mother. Chockalinga felt a throbbing atomic change in the sacred *sandhya* hour of the setting sun.

The restless sea threw on the shore wave after wave of wondrous motion, shape and beauty. Chockalinga stood speechless at the sea-change that was coming over him silently but swiftly. Standing in the very midst of the spraying waters,—it was the true baptismal hour for him—the waves rolling from the far-off depths of the sea and breaking at his very feet in cooling showers, and the waves of light from the marvellous eyes of Sarasvati illumining him with a new vision of life.

CHAPTER XIV

WORDS AND DEEDS

(1)

"Ranga, it's a pity you still believe in the magic of words. Speech is always a fatal gift for action. You know it more than I do, both its psychology and its ethics, but some mysterious force of your own native instinct is drawing you to the lure of words," Kandan pleaded with all the sincerity that he could throw into his eyes and words just to relieve an aching heart.

Kandan and Sarasvati, Rangan and Rajeswari were seated in a circle on the first terrace of the fort. The breeze was blowing in steadily and the setting sun threw a flood of golden light on the trembling waves of the ocean, which were galloping to the shore one after the other as if in a race to catch first the sinking glory of the sun.

"No, no, Kanda, you still hold to your Oxford views. You despise the glory of words, though oftentimes I've envied your own quiet verbal

charm and dignity. Words too have a high place in the scheme of life. Where action fails words have often won—you can cut a knot with a sword, but to stitch you can't do without a needle, though you have to ply it unceasingly in a series of endless minor strokes. But for the glory of words, Kanda, the whole history of our race would have been a very different thing—mere clod of earth untouched by fire; a mere waste-land, dry and dreary, with no flower garden therein. It may be that words, like fire, are double-edged. You may destroy as well as build beautifully; build with words the finest edifice to the spirit of man, as great as the pyramids and as everlasting. It's just the gift which tells off the man from the beast—words, words."

"Speak like gods and act like beasts, that is the first weakness of man, Ranga. I must dissent from this extreme eulogy of the tongue. The most beautiful words and the choicest phrases have never won the freedom of a nation from the yoke of foreign rule, not even its own slave-mind. *Yoga* is disciplined action. India has preached since the *Vedic* days the loftiest ideals, high and perfect as Himalayan peaks, and left them there unrealised in deeds. In action, we are nowhere. That is why our life is so uneven, and we so low and

poor in everything among the nations ; nothing but stagnant, shallow pools, at different levels, what should have flowed into a glorious, fertilising river fed by the eternal snows."

"Kanda, this speech itself from you tells me of the highest action-value of words ; it stirs me."

"What are we worth, Ranga, without deeds which alone have the power of cleansing the channels of life, converting into bliss the wild energy of words? Words are but symbols of a moving spirit, a fire glowing within, like the sparks that fly in the air. They illumine nothing but the darkness around ; they warm nothing. Perhaps they tell you that the flame is still unsteady and needs more of nursing and caution to keep it alive."

Kandan shook his head decidedly as if all doubts were at rest, at least for him, and continued, "Action is the soul of life, Ranga. Words are but sparks which die peacefully the moment the flame of action is steady and has set in. Let us act, Ranga. Let us put our dreams into action and realise them. Without honest, untiring work, there is no happiness for our long-ailing land ; wise but weak because we have not got the courage for action."

"Words may be sparks, Kanda, but they are

divine sparks, like the broken light from the stars. Words themselves are pure action at its highest, Kanda. Even at the lowest, they are the loyal first steps to action. You can't run a ladder without rungs, that too a political ladder—unless of course you are a first-class *yogi*. For mass action nothing like words. The executive mechanism of man refuses to work unless pulled by words. And without words! You may as well draw water from yonder well on the shore without a rope or a bucket! I'm less ambitious."

"Ranga, it's your figures of speech that deny you the true taste of life. They are really taking you away far, far from a true sense of values, the centre."

"Kanda, I know that you distrust them but they illumine me with strange shots of light along the darkest corridors; make me see things better. Action isolates life and breaks it up into little stagnant pools of water amidst rocks and holes, shrubs and jungles. Words spread and move like monsoon rains making rivers and fertilising the high and the low, and carrying a sacred, even gift to all. Pray don't underrate the value of words. Our own Congress knew it so well for thirty years and it is now the greatest monument to the glory of words."

In a great national movement like ours, nothing like words. When a mighty lake is chafing its bunds, do you go on baling its restless waters with rope and bucket; simply open out a surplus weir of safety and sacrifice. Pray, don't oppose me in this Kanda. We must begin the movement in the District by calling a big meeting."

"You would be simply courting trouble without succeeding in doing anything. Who cares for speeches in these days? Only work counts," Kandan replied calmly.

"Kanda, politics are not like work in the laboratory where you may toil quietly and laboriously for years and announce the result of your researches some day to a wondering world in ten words and profit the whole race by it. The laboratory of man, the political animal, is out in the open. Every street corner is his. Words alone can kindle and set free the magic flow of feelings. And when the time comes to harness this flow to the wheel of action, action comes easily in its own wake, like thunder after lightning. For both are twins, Kanda. Please don't oppose the holding of a big meeting to stir this pond of our District and dredge the slime. We'll hold it on this very beautiful *maidan* which seems to have been waiting

these peaceful years only for some such glorious active end. Let us declare war from here so that the whole world may hear."

"How do you get publicity for your meeting—by beat of tom-tom?"

"Beat of tom-tom! Quite primitive, Kanda; why, I'll wire the news to the Madras papers and ask the editors to grind a leading note, and the sub is my friend and he will feature the news."

"Now I understand why you want a meeting, Ranga, that you may make some news of your resignation and get a leader for your sacrifice." Rajee pricked the bubble, and Rangan smarted but without any sacrifice of words this time.

"Rajee, you may mock at me and my patriotism. But nothing like a meeting to strike the imagination of the rustic folk and rouse the patriotic feelings of the people. It pours courage into the quaking heart; crowd psychology creates a new vision of life. In a great national movement like ours which has to cover the whole of a sub-continent, nothing like the spreading and moving glory of words. Rajee, words and deeds are one. That is the highest concept. They are twins; not step-brothers by [different mothers as you conceive them to be,—a false philosophy of life."

Everyone seemed to listen to Rangan intently, and encouraged by this silence Rangan began to hammer while still the iron was hot. "Dear Kanda, pray don't oppose the holding of a meeting. We shall hold it on this beautiful *maidan*. I'll wire the news to the Madras papers. In flaming headlines Tranquebar will appear, and this old, mouldy town of the eighteenth century will throb with the pulse of renascent India. Kanda, if you are still unconvinced by my words, ask Rajee. I think that she too is of my way of thinking and I trust her words on critical occasions."

Rajee said in a very serious voice, "Kanda, I bow to your judgment though I agree with Rangan to a limited extent. Let us hold but one meeting to tell the whole world of the grand change that has come over Rangan and the great District of his birth—just half-an-hour for the flow of his feelings and the magic craft of his oratory. Let Rangan blow off the steam that he may settle down to work the better. Where is the orator born who cares to go perchance to the jail even without one farewell speech or message to his fellow countrymen? Pray, Kanda, don't ask human nature to perform the impossible."

"But, Ranga, you are opposed in this by your

own sister who pleads for some quiet work as an example to all. She says, words have only misled men. Who can neglect her wise words?" Kandan asked.

"Kanda, dearly I love my sister. But what does she know of the world and the subtle ways of high politics? She has no doubt a wonderful intuition and almost a second sight into men and things. But in these minor, mundane matters her lofty mind does not even touch the ground. Why should it? Monsoon clouds, to fill a lake with fresh water, do they bend and bow or circle around the bed of a lake? They roam in the spacious sky, and rain from lofty heights and scatter wild and plenty the beautiful drops of rain, like Kubera his riches. The rolling drops roll a little more and form a precious rivulet till they seek a place of safety which we call a lake."

Sarasvati quickly replied before the echoing silver voice of Rangan had quite finished its rhythmic peals of music in the air, "I'm no match, indeed, to my brother's gifts of oratory. He plays with figures of speech like these urchins picking shells on the shore and pelting the mighty waves of the sea. What does it matter to them that they raise no ripples on the waves or in the

sea? Sport is sport. Yes, as Rajee says, Rangan may be allowed the last chance for his oratory—I've not heard him till now—ere he goes to jail like a true patriot. But my only fear is that the meeting itself may be prohibited by the police and the Collector."

"Well said, Sarasvati, that's also my fear and hope. Quite like you, there's is a prophetic ring in your speech," Kandan cried with wonder and admiration in his eyes.

But Rangan, wounded, rushed a torrent of words, "Never, never, impossible. Mr. Lance is not a fool to play with me. It was but yesterday I was the Collector's right hand, and my friend, Nataraja, who is still there in my place, won't allow dealing with me so lightly. If only to prove my words and show my strength, we should hold a meeting."

Chockalinga, who felt that his prestige too was involved in this matter, broke his long and reverent silence and said, "No, no, the Collector knows that I too have joined hands with you, and they won't break up or prohibit the meeting. I stand guarantee for that. Yes, let us hold the meeting and see. I'll beat the whole Taluk into this sacred square. Kandan's word is now law to me."

And Chockalinga turned towards Sarasvati and

said in a deeply reverent tone, "Madam, your words are words from Heaven." And Kamakshi stood by Sarasvati in all the perfection of her bird-like beauty, and the falcon eyes of Chockalinga met Kamakshi's blue eyes that twinkled like stars.

Chockalinga underwent the change that an eddy feels when it resolves back again into the calm and flowing water after the whirling force of passion has spent itself. There was a sincere note in Mr. Mudaliar's words, the accents of a true pilgrim-worshipper at his ancient, far-away, family shrine.

It was decided eventually that a meeting should be held and Chockalinga shouted in a voice of decision, "I'll drive the whole Taluk into this sacred square on Friday evening at four. I'll fill Tranquebar and this fort with my Nandan, Mookkan and Katteri; with my Irullan, Karuppan and Irullappan; Govindan, Pavadai and Nallan. They are brave and loyal fellows, the like of whom you could never see on earth. I place entirely at your disposal, all my men."

Meanwhile, Rangan scribbled a few lines on a note paper and called out, "Ponna, where are you? Take this out to the post-office and telegraph it at once."

Of course Ponna was ever ready. He was

standing near-by on the other side of the wall. He briskly executed the order.

"Is that a telegram to the Madras papers?"

"Yes," came the laconic reply from Rangan.

Rangan began to feel the strength of an elephant for work in silence. After all words are words, and deeds are deeds.

(2)

At about the same time, another scene of the same drama was being enacted at Vallam, the official residence of the Collector of Tanjore. It is a little village beautifully situated on the dry, bracing uplands of Tanjore, enjoying the rich products of the Cauvery Delta and claiming at the same time immunity from its humid and enervating climate.

The District of Tanjore, in fertility, population, wealth, refinement and ancient traditions, is one of the foremost in South India and its Collectorship is the current equivalent to the old kingship. It is the most coveted prize in the Indian Civil Service of the Tamil Land.

Mr. Lance had taken twenty-three years to ripen into the Collector of Tanjore. He was a man of deeds, not of words. But he always thought that for his powers, both mental and moral, even a

Collectorship had become too opaque and narrow a bushel. For a wiser decision while young he should have ended to his heart's content, laying at the service of the Empire a career as brilliant as Lord Cromer's in Egypt or Marshall Lyuatey's in Morroco, nay even of Lord Curzon in India. So Mr. Lance had to be content with the highest rung in the ladder of his own early choice, and too long a stay even in the highest rung not only curtails ambition and energy but the higher and the more difficult quality of sympathy. Mr. Lance was discontented with himself.

Mr. Lance had a paternal notion of the welfare of the people committed to his charge, the notion generated in the dry traditions of his great service. He had by nature a heart for the poor and almost a Martian fondness for straight irrigation channels, though he knew as a student of dynamics that water-drops, like human footsteps, delight to take a winding course. For, he believed in the first duty of the governing mind that wayward freedom either of water-drop or of man must be controlled and regulated at all cost.

When he first heard that the quiet of his District was likely to be disturbed by the freedom craze that was blowing like a tempest all over the country,

he had decided on prompt measures. He summoned a conference of the big three of the district; the District Superintendent of Police and the Assistant Collector who was supposed to be his chief adviser, and himself.

“Mr. Lance, you do your own inherent goodness and statesmanship much wrong. Nothing can disturb the chronic quiet of my own District, even if Gandhiji shifts his headquarters from Sabarmati to Tanjore. I'm born and bred in this District; I know the temper of my people. Nothing will move them to war. I know their pulse. There is no danger now. No fear, Mr. Lance, in my District, unless you load them with repression and turn the sheep into wolves. You shouldn't tease the worm till you make it turn round and fight. My District once produced pioneers and statesmen but now it produces only able *vakil gumasthas*, petition-writers, canvassing agents and accountants.”

“And every now and then a brilliant Assistant Collector.”

Mr. Natarajan, the Assistant Collector, gracefully accepted the compliment and said affably, “I repeat, Mr. Lance, don't make any fuss about this Tranquebar affair. It will die an inane death after a few speeches from Rangan. Of all places on earth,

Tranquebar! Tranquebar,—old, dilapidated, with nothing but salt-eaten ruins—not even crabs thrive there!”

“But, Nataraja, I’m afraid of Kandan—it was you who made me fear him. You know him better—that was why I left him undisturbed till now, though our valuable friend, Mr. Mudaliar, wanted to book him.”

“Yes, I know Kandan quite well. He is a very good and sincere worker. He may touch and improve a few men or villages here and there, but he has not that blazing power to rouse to action on a grand scale a large body of men. He is not an advertiser, and without it no work, not even patriotic work, can spread. Even a saint can’t work magic under modern conditions without publicity.”

“But now that Rangan has also joined hands with Kandan, all the materials for an explosion are ready according to your own rules of reckoning—and we must prevent their coming together; is it not, Nataraja?”

“I know the whole brood—I lived with them three years at Oxford and I know Rajeswari Bai. She has a strange power of pulling people towards her. Now that Rangan has resigned, I hope my transfer to Guntur stands cancelled?”

"You don't like to face that work at Guntur?"

"I should rather not, unless duty makes it inevitable for me. Your whole policy is wrong, and you are wholly underrating the forces of the new love of freedom that is stirripg and making New India. Kindness will win you many friends all over and benefit you in the long run. Send out a Viceroy like MacDonald, or better, manage to get one Mac for each District, one who can lisp mystic words of international fellowship, the Indian problem is solved for the present. MacDonald is a clever Scot."

"You know him personally, Nataraja?"

"Yes, very well; why, all of us, especially Rangan who had also worked for him in general elections; and Rangan too can command beautifully those vague words of sympathy; but Kandan, who also knows him, does not trust him at all and he thinks that the cause of Labour will never be safe in his hands, especially Labour in power. He thinks of him as too much of a sentimental individualist. He can work hard in opposition in the formative periods of a great humanitarian movement, but can't lead a party to victory while in power, minting words into deeds with sovereign courage, but will forsake it undoubtedly in its

critical hour on some grand ground of conscience or principle."

"Nataraja, let us leave imperial problems to the Prime-minister. My District troubles me now. But from what you say, I fear all the more this combination of Rangan, Kandan and Rajeswari at Tranquebar. Such people can make even kings of crabs. I trust your prudent head generally, but in this matter you are underestimating the joint effect. We must take energetic steps lest the peace of the District be disturbed. The young Mudaliar, if he be won over,—his influence there will lead to serious trouble. He has a tremendous following in his Taluk and his fellows are dare-devils who would cheerfully leap into fire if their master be but touched."

"That may make matters different, Mr. Lance, I agree. But Mr. Mudaliar has nothing to gain from that alliance; on the other hand he would lose all his splendid fortune. I think he is a safe fellow and he has no patriotic touch, and his love of elections to the local bodies is more for the sake of fine roads for his Auburn car. His conversion is an impossibility, Mr. Lance—for aught I know of human nature!"

"But, Nataraja, you forget your own words—

all the three there have got rare magnetic power over men. That's just also what the Government report tells me from Madras."

"Yes, that is why I say once again, don't launch on repression now and give them a chance to exercise their witchcraft. Rangan when aggrieved is no doubt a real power. He has such a mastery of emotional oratory that his eloquence touches the marrow of one's bones. Let us get accurate news and see. What does our Superintendent say?"

"What do you say, D. S. P.?" the Collector asked.

"I must be plain and frank. I won't be responsible for the peace of the place, sir, unless some immediate steps are taken to prevent the riot. The whole lot should be bound over or clapped in jail for at least three months. They should not be allowed to go about stirring villages with new and strange ideas. Even a year ago I reported that Kandan should be made to cease his activities."

"What is the latest news?"

"We shall have it in ten minutes." The D. S. P. replied straining his eyes as if waiting for some arrival.

Yes, in ten minutes a messenger came running with wired news.

"Yes, everything is taking place as I predicted. Here is the latest news: 'everything tending towards a conflagration. Even Mr. Mudaliar has definitely joined the movement. A public meeting on the biggest scale to be held on Friday evening at four. Breaches of the peace certain, unless the meeting is prohibited. Even Ponnan, C.I.D.'s loyalty doubtful; he seems to have joined them; at any rate it is not yet certain on which side he is.'"

The D. S. P. paused for a moment wiping the excited sweat on his brow and said, "This is the report from one of the ablest and most reliable of my men. My duty is plain, sir. If Mr. Mudaliar has joined it, the local Police won't fire a shot. We must use the Malabar reserves. We must send a strong contingent immediately, and take charge of the fort which is still in their hands. By wire they must be asked to quit." The D. S. P. was strong and decided.

"I agree with you. There's no good in being slow in these vital matters. You Tamils, Nataraja, have a proverb: 'what is the use of clutching at the tail after failing to catch by the horns'—only kicks. Yes, 'a stitch in time saves nine,' as the D. S. P. wisely reminds me of our own proverb. Well, I

give you orders to make adequate police arrangements but don't precipitate matters by any rash deed. I shall also camp very near at Akkur on Friday morning and watch developments."

Again another peon came running with another message. "The meeting is elaborately advertised, the countryside is aflame with enthusiasm. Rangan and Rajeswari are wonderfully active. Messages by wire have been sent to all the Madras papers and also an A. P. I. message with a friendly request to Reuter to flash a line abroad. Rangan and Rajeswari are the moving spirits. Trouble is sure on Friday, as sure as sunrise."

Mr. Lance was perturbed. He thought and mused and stroked his fingers on his right thigh, as if that would yield some message to the brain and clear the line of decision. It was a reverie stroke. Would he become even more famous than Cromer or Curzon? He abruptly dismissed Natarajan and the D. S. P., and retired to his drawing-room to think hard and clearly of the great problem of a disturbed District for the first time in his long career of twenty-three years of peace and plenty.

CHAPTER XV

'A LOG OF WOOD

(1)

It was very early dawn. The morning air was keen and dry. The twilight was just vanishing in the eastern sky. Venus, as the bright morning star, was paling before the spreading glory of the rising sun. The day was Friday, sacred to Venus and all creative work on earth. There was a kindling joy in the flooding sunshine.

Kandan was always a very early riser like all those who sleep out in the open. He had finished all alone his morning walk. He was resting for a while on the bar of sand at the mouth of the river Veerasholan, gazing in child-like wonder at the charms of solitude and the calm that reigned even over the sea and the river.

Kandan involuntarily dug the sand with his fingers till the spring water came oozing. He joyed in liberating the liquid life from the heavy bars of sand that kept the water-drops prisoner in the

under-world. He felt in that simple act of the child, victorious glee as if he had won Swaraj for India.

Kandan was lost in a *yogic* reverie: all life is alike. And a mighty wave came churning a roll of sand to his feet. From land to sea what a contrast and a wonder, he thought. On land the water is the prisoner and in the sea the land is the imprisoned. What seems is not the reality. There is something higher. This is the knotted problem of life. Action based on knowledge alone really counts, helps to realisation, guides the frail vessel of man in uncharted seas.

Kandan continued in the same contemplative mood and picked up slowly one by one the broken shells around him, and scratched therein with his finger-nails some mystic letters of thought and flung them one by one into the sea.

The sunshine came flooding everywhere and the morning calm was broken. The waves came sweeping on the shore in one huge tide singing the glory of the morning sun. The sea surged into the river and set the current going up. Kandan sat on a huge log of wood that lay near-by at the mouth of the river: it was some giant of the Ceylon forest, head cut off and bark peeled, now running its im-

mortal career on the Coromandel coast, waiting to be shaped by the axe and the chisel of the carpenter into a catamaran to take merrily its daily dexterous pleasure-trip in perilous seas.

The rushing water quickly increased in strength in the river, and ate more and more of the shore near-by, coming nearer and nearer to where the log lay like a dethroned king. In five minutes, this log of wood too would come under the sway of the sea. The whirling stream of salt-water endlessly came in ever-widening circles of foam raging up the river.

Kandan stood up to avoid a morning drench and moved a little aside to watch the scene of conquest. The waves broke into mighty ripples in the river, till at last one big rush of water caught the thinner end of the log and rolled a little the giant, showering water all over. A little shaken, it sat only the deeper in wet sand. Another sweep of water came and did likewise. Still the huge log lay unmoving like a beheaded giant.

Kandan thought and asked himself, "Why not I give the log a gentle push just at the critical moment when the rushing water rolls and lifts it a little?"

Kandan had to wait but a minute to act up to his wish. Another wave came spreading its charm

towards the log, and Kandan just at the right moment risking a morning splash of sea water gave it a firm push. The heavier end turned its big nose towards the stream, and galloped like a riding prince of old to a *svayamvara*. Another mighty wave came rushing along the river, and the ducal prince floated merrily into the mid-stream. It went up the river basking and glittering in the morning sun.

Kandan stood in wonder, lost in the stately motion of a thing that seemed but a while ago the most ponderous and safest thing in the world. He never took off his eyes from the drifting log of wood which sailed like a royal yacht. Indeed its touch was sovereign as it dipped and rose in the rippling water. A wondrous philosophy of life came flooding to his mind. Kandan, standing on the sand-dunes and watching this river-scene was lost once again in a *yogic* reverie.

Are the dumb, poor, suffering, helpless unmoving masses of a nation like this log of wood—inert and dull to all appearance, till the fateful hour for motion comes when the flood of nationalism touches them? Then how quick and wondrous they float along the current with a sovereign air of gaiety, as if born to water and waiting for it these years like a cargo boat or a Spanish galleon.

Just at that moment, Rangan and Rajeswari, Sarasvati and Kamakshi, and Chockalinga came running like children, and joined Kandan who was standing on the top of a sand-dune looking like a preacher about to begin his sermon, and just waiting for his flock to gather.

(2)

"Did you push that log of wood into the river, Kanda?" Sarasvati asked in a voice of perfect calm and certainty.

"Yes, I did, Sarasvati, but how do you know it, unless you have seen it actually from some hiding-place!" Kandan exclaimed directing his wondering eyes at her.

"I, from some hiding place in this vast open of the sea and the shore! Why, Kanda, from the lingering looks of love that you are sending trailing in its foaming wake—is the log of wood, teaching you also a lesson, something of the loftier thoughts and ways of life?" Sarasvati again asked with a smile of calm assurance.

Sarasvati continued before Kandan could answer, addressing Rajee, "Yes, Kandan takes his lessons and directions from these chance floating things which give the call to his inner voice to open

out and speak. That is the way of all *advaitic* minds. To them the whole universe is beaming with a cosmic intelligence, and a floating straw can whisper to them the rise and fall of empires; and he who knows the script can read, even a child, the song in a blade of grass or a dewdrop!"

"Don't make me ridiculous, Sarasvati, in your own matchless way by exaggerating my oddities. Minds, which don't wholly work through reason like Rajee's and Rangan's, have got to kneel in worship before these random shafts of light from Heaven."

"No, no, Kanda, I think Sarasvati was seriously expounding you as well as herself, making an honest attempt to understand and interpret what I consider to be the higher thing in life. Sarasvati and you have given me a new vision of life," Rajee said devoutly.

"Well then, let us not forget the allegory of the log of wood, in the fine exchange of compliments. What did it tell you, Kanda—some parallel philosophy that would apply to immediate politics, if not to Rangan's meeting this evening." Sarasvati turned the flow of the conversation to its true bed.

"Well, then, you are right, this log of wood has

a lesson for us all. At break of dawn, I found it as we have always found it these days since our arrival, buried in deep sand, safe and secure. While I sat upon it this morning, I thought it was as safe as solid earth. The waves came rushing up the river, mad with the ecstasy of the full moon. In five minutes, this whilom king of the forest trembled at the touch of the dashing waves. Once, twice, thrice they came, making it more and more insecure. But still the log, though it rolled a little like a giant in disturbed sleep, held firm to the ground, and I thought that the waves were powerless unless the whole sea came to their aid. I was impatient like a schoolboy and my hands craved for service. Why should I not render the waves some little human help? I just gave the log a gentle push at the just moment, and it is floating now merrily up the river. Perhaps even without my push it would have been carried into the river, sooner or later—"

"I'm not so sure of that, Kanda. It's quite possible that the flowing tide might have ebbed and the log remained there as safe as ever," Sarasvati dissented.

"May be, may be," Kandan agreed.

"But what is the lesson you drew therefrom,

Kanda?" Rajee asked still eager to solve the puzzle.

"Why, Rajee, Kandan thinks that the log of wood stands for the masses; the waves rushing up the river is the tide of nationalism that is now sweeping the country, and the gentle push is the push of the patriot." Sarasvati solved the problem in a quiet way.

"And Rangan's meeting this evening—is it the sea or the wave or the gantle push?" Rajee asked in a very serious tone which was greeted with peals of laughter in which Mr. Mudaliar too joined for courtesy's sake, though he did not quite catch the full trend of the philosophic discussion.

"Don't laugh at my meeting by propounding a metaphysical dilemma, Rajee. My meeting, if you please, is the gentle push as well as the raging sea. In its mighty current, you will soon see that it carries a whole forest of timber, a nation down the stream. Wait and see—what a splendid success the meeting is going to be!"

"Rangan's speech reminds me of the strange dream I had yesternight, Sarasvati—Rangan knows and envies me for my dreamless sleep. But the terrible dream I had in the small hours of this morning, unnerves me even now to repeat it—"

"Yes, Kandan sleeps like a child though he snores a little," Rangan endorsed.

"Like Mr. Mudaliar—it's a sign of aristocratic birth and high ideals in sleep!" Sarasvati said laughing, in which Mr. Mudaliar also joined heartily this time with some knowledge of the cause of the merriment.

(3)

"What is the dream, Kanda? Did you dream of Rangan's meeting—these dreams tell us sometimes wonderfully of the coming future—," Sarasvati asked Kandan with a note of eagerness and anxiety.

"That it ended in chaos or was broken up by the police?" Rajee asked with a sly smile.

"Rangan himself might have dreamt like that!" Sarasvati added her tribute of commentary to her brother's courage.

"Yes, surely he would have dreamt like that, but he could not sleep at all yesternight—the pity of it!" Rajee made infinite fun taking the usual liberty that was hers.

"Those who came to scoff remained to pray," Rangan preferred a classic quotation to his own energetic words.

Kandan, wishing to end the light banter on the eve of the most fateful day, said very quietly, "I'll state the dream and leave you to draw your own inferences. It's, I think, capable of several interpretations, and none sure."

"As all dreams are—and that is their virtue," Rangan made the preliminary interpretation with an astute face.

Kandan began in a serious voice. Everyone drew nearer to him with vivid interest. "It was just five minutes to four, very early dawn. I dreamt intensely—the body perspired heavily and the heart-beats almost stopped. A giant figure towering to the sky, neither very fierce nor very lovely, but just like a dark and beautiful cloud in the broad shape of a man with head and body, hands and eyes, stood from earth to heaven and seemed to bridge the sky with one stride. He was smiling, and had a long, long whip in hand. He came slowly, advancing from yonder little island in the river—millions of his myrmidons, dwarfs from the under-world held before him torchlights to light his way from heaven and show his celestial pomp."

"Was he riding?" Sarasvati eagerly asked.

"Yes, he was riding on a ridiculously small—"

"Buffalo?" Sarasvati completed the picture in a trembling voice.

"No, Sarasvati, no, not a buffalo, but a ridiculously small hippopotamus—herds of them I've seen quite as a boy, now many years ago in Africa. The giant riding his ridiculous horse, carelessly descended from the sky and emerged more fully and rode straight to the railway station. He stroked his long, long lash from up in the sky, and the end of the lash just touched the funnel of the smoking engine—No. 4 was waiting, ready to start for Mayavaram—and the engine capsized like a toy—I felt I was the station-master of Tranquebar and I begged of him on my bended knees; that I should lose my job for this. He took pity upon me, the pigmy, and with another easy stroke of the lash restored the capsized engine to the rails. Then he serenely rode further north and reached the river on the other side of the railway track and paused a moment surveying the scene as if to fix his route. He stroked his lash once again idly in the air—then there came such a sudden burst of choice fragrance as if the whole sea were converted into a lake of the finest *attar* of roses. I cried in wonder and joy."

Kandan wiped off the profuse flow of perspir-

ation even the mere recital of the dream caused, and continued in a steadier voice.

"Then he waded along the river—it was knee-deep to his little animal, and the hippopotamus swam like fish. The giant's head was in the cloud up in the sky, but you could see him smiling tenderly all the way, occasionally muttering a word of direction or two. Then he reached the mouth of the river and seemed to rest for a while on this very huge log of wood I have floated down just now—and it seemed to sink under his weight deep into the sand. Then he suddenly plunged his horse with one leap into the depths of the sea, lashing to mountain heights the sleeping waves of early dawn—then he stood towering high a furlong off in the sea just in front of the fort, and threw a scorching look of scorn at sleeping me, raised the whip and cracked it—it cut me to the quick somewhere here very near the heart—and I suddenly woke up, and saw it was all only a terrific dream, a frightful apparition—never, never in my life have I had such a dream. Immediately I left my bed—you were all quite asleep—I ran out into the open, and the full moon was shining bright, pouring steadily comfort into my broken heart."

"I apprehend some dire calamity, Kanda. Ranga,

cancel the meeting," Sarasvati said breaking the icy silence.

"No, no, never, Sarasvati, for an excited dream—no such foolish step that would demoralise us, and impair for all time our gift for work. Rangan seems to be correct in his guess that the Collector of Tanjore would take no notice of this meeting at Tranquebar, almost a deserted island! I think the meeting will pass off very quietly—after all, it is a very small affair in the life of a nation. But we must immediately set to work on some plan, draw a programme of work—"

"A five-year plan or a ten-year plan?" Rajee finished the speech.

"Yes, I know Rajee's plans and ideas; they are quite in tune with mine. What are yours, Ranga—the work for the morrow after the meeting."

"Yes, Kandan's call is the correct call. Let us prepare the plan of work for the future. To make a New India that will last for ever, a blessing to the poor and hungry millions—a five-year plan of perfection. Let us sit now round yonder sand-dune." Rangan spoke with a new sense of dignity in work.

On the top of the sand-dune grew a cluster of sea-weeds. Their sharp-shoots waved in the air like a new, green flag flapping in the wind.

(4)

"Ah! Ranga, what is Swaraj worth," Kandan exclaimed as soon as the little group had settled down to a listening mood, "if it does not mean freedom to everyone of the three hundred and fifty millions, even the humblest, to grow to the highest in his own land. We should work for a Swaraj that would bring out from each his best, in all the pattern of God's own infinite variety, both in the inner and the outer life of the individual, and reward each with the fruits of Nature according to his needs, the needs of a simple and pure life. Then only this sacred land of *Bharatavarsha* will be sacred in fact, as it is now in legend."

"Yes, Kanda, the greatest danger is that the vineyard of liberty reclaimed, tilled and pruned by the labour of the patriot, and manured with the blood of the unknown volunteer may be annexed at harvest time by a few at the top, the merchant, the landlord and the usurer. They may use the gathered power against their own fellowmen and exploit the million poor. That must be made impossible in our Swaraj."

"Yes, Ranga," Rajee said, almost moved to tears, "as you have so often spoken eloquently in London—the Indian problem is the problem of the poor

who have been kept poor all through the ages. Its vast man-power given by God as a sacred gift to earth is wasted most pitifully like autumn leaves on the roadside. Swaraj must give it both scope and direction and save this vast man-power from being exploited."

"And not till then will India know true peace. The evil that paralyses our life, Kanda, is not our religious or tribal discords but the most iniquitous and irresponsible system of land-tenure which, like the hook-worm, sucks the blood of the poor in a hundred ways, and all toil goes to feed only the parasite. The hand that works in the mud and mire of the fields only labours as an eternal coolie hand, and gathers the golden grains of the harvest only for a callous overlord's bank account. The shrivelled hand that plucks the cotton on the miles and miles of rich, black acres does not own even a piece of cloth to cover the shame of a slave's birth, not even a rag to wipe the tears of sorrow that come welling up the eyes at the sight of famished children at home. Sweated labour for another, Kanda, is the most ancient sorrow of man, but in this sacred land it is the most bitter salt-sea flood, as we have lost our freedom both within and without."

Rangan saw in Rajee's eyes her unspoken, admiring words of approval.

"Ranga, your indictment is true. No doubt, we occasionally produce giants like our own Himalayan peaks," Rajee made her contribution to the plan, caught in Rangan's stream of fancy, "but our average level is but the low level of malarial swamps where no healthy life can be lived."

"We lack energy, the active kindliness and the co-operative will and the public virtues that make civic life a pleasure and an aid to individual fulfilment. There is a yawning gulf of apathy between the young and the old in this unhappy land, and we lack the common thread that knits the loose and scattered flowers into a garland of worship for the Mother."

Rangan spoke fervidly and turning to Kandan said, "Yes, Kanda, you are right; I'm converted to your view. The glory of words is nothing before the glory of deeds. We must work selflessly if we want to win our own self-respect; we must make the finest use of the energy these renascent times have set free."

"Yes, Ranga, we must build our Swaraj in such a way," Kandan warmly approved, "that we produce no brokers at the top, like worms in cheese, who deal carelessly with the lives of millions. The tyrant and the coward shall not

grow in this ancient land of love. The difficulty is not in getting Swaraj ; for we are surely getting it. For ours is now a fight to the finish ; to live or die as a nation. The test of our new life is not only in winning freedom but in applying it selflessly and courageously to the freedom of all, even the humblest in the land."

"Then, do you think, Kanda, that Swaraj will be easily got?"

"Easily got in the sense that it would be surely got, in less than three years time from now. For, mark me, when a whole nation is singing the full-throated song of freedom none can keep it back for ever, not even the gods. A nation's freedom is like the swell of the sea—once it rises, no bunds on the shore, no land-marks, or sand-dunes of repression, can limit its flow, but everything is flooded till—"

"Do you think that this wave of unrest now, Kanda, will soon become the swell of the sea?"

"Why this doubting question, Ranga? Watch intently the tremor on the rising waves and the deep moan of the mid-sea. This swell is Swaraj."

"If the wind but favours!"

"Why, surely, it will ; only our pilots must be ready with the sails, and the captain watchful, keen-sighted and patient at the rudder to steer clear of

many sunken rocks and shoals. For, Ranga, our Indian problem is unique in many ways both in bulk and in quality. It is a sub-continent which we are now trying to fuse into a political unity—imagine the several States of Europe uniting under one Government. India knows a unity higher than the political, the unity of the spirit and of culture. But now this higher spirit of man is sought to be yoked to the utilitarian wheel of politics, so that what collects now as so many little communal pools of virtue at different levels on the slopes of life may meet each other and flow together into a broad and common river, each sharing in the life and joy of another. But to make this dream of renascent India possible, politics itself should suffer a sea-change.”

“What do you mean by sea-change, Kanda, it is a poetic word and may mean anything.”

“In its simplest sense, a change for the higher, a change in quality. Politics are wooden now. The motives of action should be spiritualised. The old system that goes to make the rich richer and the poor poorer must be broken up from its very foundations, and the nation’s energy moved along new channels, feeding all the plants and trees alike, so that each may share and get according to its

needs the full benefits of Nature, and put forth its own finest leaves and flowers—”

“Kanda, you too have begun to talk like Rangan. Is it the result of the dream or of Rangan’s influence? Everything sounds so nice and uplifting as words,—but how are you going to translate them into action and apply them to the chaos and struggle of the day?” Rajee asked, striking a vigorous note into the airy flight of winged words.

“If I understand aright, Kandan says, to illustrate it with a figure, politics is but the leather-strap that transmits the energy from the generating centre to the hundred wheels that roll, big and small, each grinding its own share of work and uniting at the end to weave the living mantle, the fine fabric of social life.”

“Rangan’s words add only confusion to the chaos,” Rajee said in her own irrepressible way.

But Kandan came to the rescue and approved the commentary. “Rangan is right, Rajee, that is just what I meant. Politics are a mere distributing media of power, and by themselves quite lifeless like the leather-strap in a factory. But in actual life the administrators, the distributing media of the power, are not dead matter but active, living men with a little initiative and purpose of their own, by

which they pervert the power meant for common good to selfish ends, and fail to pass the life current to where it is most needed."

"Well, then, why don't you sketch a perfect scheme to be worked out immediately after Rangan's meeting this evening?" Rajee asked sincerely.

"It's the easiest thing in the world to sketch an ideal polity—it has been the work of many since the days of Plato. But to work it up you want the men, till the ideals expressed in action become part of our being. We want a *sanyasin* order of men to whom compassion, the joy of service and selflessness come as native as the drops of honey to the tiny, pure, *thumba* flower. Men like Gandhiji, instead of being a rare world-phenomenon to be worshipped like the sun, must grow on every hedge like blackberries. At least every village must have one Gandhiji working for its renovation till it is restored to healthy life."

"Like Kandan," Sarasvati applauded.

"You talk of Swaraj, Kanda, as if Swaraj has been gained and it is now in the hollow of your hand?" Rajee asked.

"Where is Swaraj, Rajee; it does not lie outside you. It lies in you, it lies with you; it lies within you!"

"It's nice and charming as a merely verbal philosophy. But Great Britain won't yield to all these hypnotic *mantras*."

"They will yield, Rajee, the moment they know from the ring of your own peaceful words that you mean what you say. The sun-dried men here may think that aeroplanes and machine-guns can keep in the pen for all time the hungry millions. But the world is not really ruled by them. Our answer to them is: the only power on earth that can conquer and lay at rest violence is non-violence, even as water alone can quench fire. Peace alone can win war. War never really does. It drives hate deeper into the heart, even as violence drives but deeper a random thorn in the flesh."

Kandan paused a moment and spoke again in measured words, "From what I read of the lines in the sky, Swaraj is certain. No power on earth can deny it to us but ourselves. The seeming discords of the day, of tribe and religion, will close into kinship like the dark scattered clouds that close their serried ranks in the monsoon hour when the wild winds play the horn of thunder, and sound the march of descending rains."

Kandan cleared his voice and continued, "Great Britain herself needs to be friends with India. She

has forty millions to feed, and her patriotic soil can feed but fifteen. How long can she go on feeding the other twenty-five by selling cotton goods, coal and hardware to a world that has learnt to produce its own in every country—her problem can be solved only by a large scheme of emigration—but her statesmen are now burying their heads in the dry sands of party politics and petty triumphs and see not the true path to light and freedom. The days of narrow nationalism are over. The future Government of man shall be only by two agencies—the League of Nations and the village *panchayat* or the urban Council. Decentralisation shall be complete and life-giving.”

“Then you mean, Kanda, the attitude to life should fundamentally change, if all that you say should come to pass. Everyone should feel that his neighbour is as sacred as himself and love him as he loves himself,” thoughtfully Rangan added his commentary. “All the religions have preached it these two thousand years and more, and Christianity the most, but practised it the least. That is why the result is so barren and the West is deeply entangled in a vicious circle of hate and strife.”

Sarasvati who watched in silence the discourse, said, “The best service to our land will be to

show the real way by setting up one village, and working it out perfectly on the true model. From what I see we have here a pure *sanyasin* order—let us consecrate five years to that work before we think of anything else. Give me, Kanda, in your 'utmost hour of thought, a five-year plan to work a village into a perfect idyll of life. If one such blossoms into life, I know then, from a solitary flower, that this stagnant pool of life is truly a lotus-pond and not an *alli* ditch. I'll then patiently wait for many more lotus-buds to bloom in due time. Pray, Kanda, give us a plan of work—the meeting this evening will come and go fading in an hour like the red, tiny *anthimallika* flower that blossoms at five and dies at six in the evening.”

Sarasvati's voice had a glorious cadence but it was charged with a strange melancholy.

“Pray, Kanda, begin with my village. It now belongs to you and the whole world by virtue of a higher title,” Chockalinga laid his all at the feet of Kandan and Sarasvati.

“Then, Chockalinga, may God bless you! Yours is a sacrifice all too rare in the annals of modern India. Yes, let us prepare a plan of work and live only for it till the freedom of our land is gained.

In the cocoanut garden where the toddy-shop stood, Ranga, let us consecrate an *ashrama*, an order of men devoted to the Indian Rural Service. All the aids of science, the thoughts of philosophy, the blessings of religion, the beauty of arts and literature that make men like gods, I would bring to the threshold of every cottage in script that it can understand and in deeds that it can enjoy. Under true Swaraj, every Indian village will be free, autonomous and perfect like an atom that holds in its tiny bosom the cosmic power and the rich cadence of the whole universe."

"Can we not work up a village, Kanda, thoroughly ignoring the existing political conditions?" Rajee asked with a real desire.

"Quite possible, Rajee, that's just what we'll try;—only we require a nobler order of men and a very high and united average among the common folk—pure and selfless, with full control of both body and mind, like the links of a chain, even and equally strong. Then we can ignore the environment; then fetters lose their hold, and we march on to both individual and collective self-realisation;—these excrescent growths will fall off, lacking the impurities to feed upon. For such ideal work you must produce a tribe or a race which won't give

birth to a single broker ready to sell for a mess of pottage his precious, undivided share in the common heritage."

"That is really a state of perfection you are preaching, Kanda, in which there would be no need for one man to rule or work for another—all government would be unnecessary—"

"Quite so, Rajee, but that is the spiritual aim of all government; govern so well and so little. The basis of all action is that man may be finally liberated from action. Is it not? The final aim of life is that you may be released from life for all time. That is the spiritual urge in man. Without this harmonising centre, all our activities, social, political or economic, will be but diffuse, unrelated, disruptive, wasteful and injurious. There will be no joy in deeds or words,—no rhythm in life."

"Quite so, Kanda," Sarasvati said and Rangan and Rajeswari nodded assent. Kandan paused a moment, driving his fingers through the sand.

"Rajee, there is only one approach to all pure, good and noble work, as you yourself told me one evening before this very sea. *Brahmacharya* alone can take us on to victory in the cause to which we are wedded. Touch no great work till you are fit in mind for this self-conquest and purity. This

control of the senses and the slow rendering of the carnal energy in man into the divine light, will bring us *atma-gnanam*, a cosmic consciousness compared with which the gift of reason and intelligence would seem but a toy-gift to a child. Till Swaraj is won, let us take a vow, Ranga and Rajee—and Sarasvati is far above us, she needs no urge to acquire a virtue that has come to her as a cradle gift,—and Chockalinga and Kamakshi, something tells me of a common run of life for you both. Join us and work with us till Swaraj is won. God will bless you. Let us do our duty for the day as the time-spirit moves us, and the fruits will take care of themselves."

There was a tense silence for a moment and the group sat deeply immersed in thought.

The sea had already begun to ebb and the current was now flowing down the river. The stately log of wood had also floated down, and was being buffeted by the eddies and cross-currents at the very narrow mouth of the river where the water churned and foamed, circling round and round.

Ponnan came rushing along the sea-shore, and even at a distance it could be seen that something serious was the matter that moved him to this racing flight on the heavy sand.

(3)

"Master, master, a battalion of three hundred Malabar police reserves have arrived with fixed bayonets and rifles. Our things have been uncere- moniously thrown out of the fort, and they are now bleaching in the sun. I also hear that they are going to prohibit the meeting."

"Any more news, Ponna?" Kandan asked, and Rangan felt as he had felt at the Egmore third-class booking-office window.

"But already a thousand from all parts of the District have come—and our Mudaliar's men have come in fine array, five hundred strong, all clothed in khaddar and marching under the leadership of Nallan and Karian."

"I feared trouble all along, nothing like quiet work, Ranga," Sarasvati spoke in a subdued tone.

"I'll manage the whole thing; I'm not afraid of police turbans. Leave it to me, Sarasu, I'll manage the whole affair very quietly. Evidently the police badly needed a change to the sea-side. They are glad of the chance I have given them."

Mr. Mudaliar was indignant, but Kandan cautioned him to be calm. The small group broke up

immediately with a very heavy heart. There was anxiety in every face.

Kandan looked around and intently at the sea that glittered in the blazing shine of the sun. He was surprised to find the heavy log of wood floating along with him very near the shore, proudly ascending and descending wave after wave, as if it had already decided to attend Rangan's public meeting at all cost.

CHAPTER XVI

THE HOUR OF FATE

(1)

A sentinel, with a drawn bayonet, was posted at the gates of the fort. And the old Danish fort after so many years of widowhood seemed to have at last gained her bridal day.

The District Superintendent of Police, dead tired after the sixty miles of continuous drive in a Ford car on the dusty and jumping roads from Tanjore to Tranquebar, flung himself in an easy chair in the central hall of the fort. The Deputies, the Inspectors and the Subs of four Taluks lined round him with bated breath and whispering humbleness.

Khan Bhadur Meera Sahib was there with his flowing beard and hawk-like features. He was the direct descendant of a soldier of fortune from Central Asia who distinguished himself in the famous siege of Ginjee in the time of Aurangzebe, for which he was rewarded with a *jagir*.

Rao Bhadur Vedagiri Iyer was also there with

his faultless Brahmin looks and features, slightly sun-burnt and roughened by police discipline and hard work, ever ready and alert to prove at a moment's notice his loyalty to the salt he had eaten.

Rao Saheb Ratnam Pillai too was there, a young man but a darling of fortune with fine rolling eyes, and a beautifully trained moustache that grew luxuriantly like *nanal* grass on the fertile banks of the Cauvery, which kept the fretting waters from chafing the banks. The Rao Saheb was a happy by-product of dyarchy. He entered the police ranks as an ordinary constable. But in the tumble of elections under the new dispensation, his own brother-in-law became Minister for Development. Under his fostering care, Rao Saheb Ratnam Pillai, like the mango tree in the street magic, developed quickly from a constable into a Deputy Superintendent of Police with a title on the New Year's day.

Khan Bahadur Meera Sahib, of course, depended more on his ancestry, the long-lasting and never-to-be forgotten valour which his adventurous ancestor displayed in the siege of Ginjee. He had also the good fortune of being born a Muhammadan in South India, and his rise was as sure as that of the morning sun to meridian heights. It was also rumoured

that he, the Khan Bahadur, would become the D. S. P. at the next vacancy.

As for Vedagiri, he was found to be one of the indispensable Brahmins in every scheme of life. He had done such excellent work for his masters that nobody could really ignore and keep him down in the lower rungs of the ladder.

(2)

"What do you think of the situation, Khar Bahadur? I fear the Mudali has commandeered the whole Taluk into Tranquebar. Very foolish of him to do it! Why this huge crowd? Does Rangaswami know Tamil? I'm told he is going to address in English. How many here in this crowd, you think, know English—barely a dozen I should think." The D. S. P. rolled his tongue very complacently. He had just finished a very hearty breakfast and Tranquebar was justly famous for its fine fish.

"It's all mere show, sir—nothing will come out of it. I rather think we should have quietly ignored this meeting; especially you, sir, need not have come all the way from Tanjore for this. I could have managed it—why, our head-constable Thandavarayan says he could have managed the

whole thing with half-a-dozen men." The Khan Bahadur decorously managed his broken English, and the D. S. P. was rather impressed by his commonsense point of view.

"I respectfully beg to differ from my friend, the Khan Bahadur," Rao Bahadur Vedagiri began to ingratiate himself against his rival for the headship of the District. "I come from this very Taluk, sir—I know these wild men who gave no end of trouble to the Danish Government. Mr. Mudaliar, though burly, is at heart, when provoked, a very courageous man; and he is a very great influence with these wild men, and his word is law to them. It was but last week they looted twenty-thousand *kalams* of paddy all in one hour, looted their own *pannai*. Sir, you have done the most proper thing in having made these adequate arrangements and brought the Malabar reserves."

"I rather agree with you on the whole, Vedagiri. Rao Bahadur is an old fox, you know, Khan Bahadur." The D. S. P. complimented the Rao Bahadur, and pleasantly laughed, belching profusely."

Rao Sahib Ratnam Pillai, of course, could not display any special powers on this critical occasion; neither his local knowledge—for he was a Tinnevely

man—nor his tongue. But everything has its own compensation in Nature. He rolled his eyes in flashes of special police anger, and stroked the moustache and trimmed it at both the ends into fine lance-heads as a gesture of courage and deeds that were his lot in life. He rolled his eyes as if he would burn the whole of Tranquebar with a look of fire.

"Still, Khan Bahadur," the D. S. P. gave his final orders, "now that we have made the fullest arrangements, see that the situation is well in hand and nothing untoward happens. As Vedagiri says these are wild men, and I myself know Mr. Mudaliar well enough—poor chap, why and how has he drifted into this muddle, I wonder? You know the meeting has been prohibited under 144. The Divisional Magistrate will be here in half-an-hour. You made a mistake in the morning. As soon as you came here you should have cleared this *maidan* of all men, women and children—now it would be difficult—several hundreds have crowded now—"

"I suggested so in the morning to my friend, the Khan Bahadur," Vedagiri softly exclaimed.

The Khan Bahadur simply looked at him sniffing contemptuously.

"Well, let that go, now post a company of the

police at the entrance to the town itself, and block more men coming in, adding to the excitement and the confusion;—I'm dead tired, Khan Bahadur; I'll take a little rest now. The meeting at five? I hope it won't take place and Rangan won't disobey the order—and force us to needless action."

"Yes, sir, we will attend to the minutest detail—you may take rest, sir, after the long and tedious drive," said Rao Bahadur Vedagiri, in a fine coaxing voice—for he too was in the same grade as the Khan Bahadur and expected to act as the D. S. P. when the chance came.

The Khan Bahadur also followed the good example of the D.S.P. and retired for a nap. For he had also had a really hearty breakfast. Nothing like a little nap after that!

Poor Vedagiri felt that the whole burden fell on him though he was not the Deputy of the place, but the Khan Bahadur. But he cheerfully accepted it as it gave him a chance to show his superior organising power. He reckoned all possible and impossible emergencies and tried to provide for them.

His very manœuvres kindled the ire of the idle crowd waiting for the speech and the meeting. They were becoming more and more fretful and excited. Nandan, Mookkan and Katteri, Irullan,

Karuppan and Irullappan, were itching at the hand for a counter-stroke, and looked with love at the debris of an old house and the heaps of broken bricks that lay around in inviting confusion, idle for many years.

"Ponna, why all this tremendous array of police force for such a simple rustic meeting as ours? Three hundred policemen with gleaming bayonets and loaded guns! You know why all this—you are a town man and must know these things. Mere threat? or something dire will happen to us all? What harm is there in Rangan speaking and telling us the current news?" Kamakshi very innocently and playfully asked Ponnai.

But Ponnai was in a very disturbed state of mind. He was moving about hither and thither the whole day, and was wearied.

"Kamakshi, your fears are well-founded. I too apprehend some trouble. Mudaliar's men are all excitable and if his person be but roughly handled, as is but likely in a huge crowd with three hundred policemen to regulate it, his Nandans, Mookkans and Katteris will all come out with brick-bats—Tranquebar with all its dilapidated houses is full of these missiles, so temptingly full—and then the result you don't know, Kamakshi, the police will

open fire—brick-bats will be answered by bullets, and blood will flow like water—”

Kamakshi shuddered at the thought. She felt very near fainting.

“Ponna, you fear some calamity to our friends and masters?”

“Yes, I fear, Kamakshi; nay, I’m almost sure. The turn the events have taken this morning is unexpected, and all the materials for an explosion are gathering quickly,—in half-an-hour we can’t even escape from here, Kamakshi. The way in and out, is already barricaded. And more on your account, Kamakshi, I’m terribly afraid,” Ponna closed in a low, husky voice, tenderly looking at her.

“Why on my account, Ponna?” Kamakshi hesitatingly asked. For she, the shrewd girl, read to some extent the language of his eyes.

“Is’t not clear to you yet, my pretty bird—I love you, deeply and tenderly love you. I adore you. There is no joy for me on earth till I marry you and call you my own for ever. From the very first day I set my eyes on you at Akkur, I’ve never taken them off you. My heart is throbbing, Kamakshi—”

“Very strange, Ponna, that you should feel for me like this. I’m lonely, poor—”

"So all the more I seek you and love you—"

"Ponna, I don't as yet feel the call of love or marriage—a rustic girl like me, what do I know of these—my *maman* is my master in this matter. But I feel a sister's love for you, Ponna,—your mere presence and words give me a strange but true comfort."

"Do but pass your word, Kamakshi. I love you intensely—in half-an-hour this *maidan* will become the scene of bloodshed and riot—there's only one way of escaping out of this—tell me, Kamakshi, I'll brave it out for your sake; we shall escape. There lies a catamaran there, ready and fit, hidden amid those ruins from the eyes of these men—we will take to it even now and sail away to safety from this danger zone—to Tirumalaivasal, but ten miles off, to lie for ever there under the eternal shade of the cocoanut trees, listening to the lisp of the sea. Kamakshi, I'll come wherever you ask me to come. Kamakshi, I'm at your feet."

Kamakshi stood terrified, unable to speak.

(4)

Fortunately Chockalinga emerged into the seclusion, himself searching for Kamakshi. Kamakshi was relieved of her embarrassment.

"Poona, Kamakshi and you plotting together! Why are you hiding in this safe corner? I thought you were a town-rat, not afraid of police turbans."

"No, no, not at all,—only I was saying to Kamakshi I feared that something untoward may happen—so many police tigers penned in a fort with bayonets and *lathis* may not remain idle. Mr. Mudaliar, one request I make most humbly—kindly ask Nallan to keep our men under control. Some random or playful act may provoke the police—"

"May provoke what? You mean to say I'm afraid of these red turbans? The D. S. P. is my friend and has tasted my hospitality more than once. He may not be now openly with me—even if he be against, I'm no coward like you, Ponna. I'm not afraid of these red turbans and khaki shorts—my men, at one stroke of my eyelids, will sweep them out into the ditch, clean—"

"Master, pray don't do any such rash act. The police are armed to the teeth. The D. S. P. and the Khan Bahadur are very hard men if it comes to that, and Vedagiri has his eyes only on promotion—they may all be your friends in fair weather as guests, but not in trouble. Master, pray listen to Ponnan's

words and keep to this corner,—Ponnan, though young knows the world, especially the police world."

"Ponna, it's very unmanly advice that you are giving me when our friends are in the very thick of the fight."

But both Ponnan and Kamakshi seemed to bend in entreaty. In this beautiful hour of prayer there was a wonderful similarity in their faces, a common outline as if the two flowers were of the same branch and came of a common seed.

Chockalinga had been noticing it for some time and in this juxtaposition it was very clear, the resemblance. Chockalinga asked with a smile, "You both look like brother and sister. Ponna, you say you are a distant cousin of Kandan—you come from this Taluk, and you remember your village?"

"Memadur."

"Memadur?" cried in the same voice Kamakshi and Chockalinga.

"Ponna, your father's name?" Chockalinga asked again.

"*Peria Pannai Vythilinga Mudaliar!*"

"*Peria Pannai Vythilinga Mudaliar!*"

Two voices blended into one in glad but incredulous surprise.

"Then, I'm your sister" Kamakshi cried overpowered by emotion.

"Yes, Kamakshi, then you are the sister of Ponnán," Chockalinga spoke with real comfort at the success of his own happy surmise. "I've known you, Kamakshi, as a little girl at your *maman's* house—and your father too was a friend of ours—he was struck with inconsolable grief at the loss of his runaway boy, his only boy; and the common impression here is that Ponnán was kidnapped even as a little boy of seven by a wandering troupe of bear-trainers. Your mother and father died broken-hearted leaving you also homeless as a little pretty child at the mercy of your *maman*—you remember, Ponna, anything of your early days now?"

"Mr. Mudaliar, I remember a few terrible things as if in a dream, but the romance of my life must make a story of its own—it can't be told in an hour or a day, and now with this peril ahead. I'm glad at last I've met my sister, on this fateful day, the one relation on earth for me."

Ponnán could not finish his speech; he was overpowered, and he gazed in speechless wonder at Kamakshi's bird-like beauty. It assumed a new significance and joy for him.

Kamakshi nestled near Ponnan, joy circling her face.

(5)

"What's the uproar there? Go out and see, Ponna. The tumult seems to increase—"

Ponnan went out quickly. For now he was even more anxious for their safety.

Chockalinga availed himself of the inviting solitude and the lonely charms of Kamakshi and flung his arms in a posture of loving entreaty before her and began, "Ever since I saw you, Kamakshi,—my heart has never been at rest. Assure me of your love now from your own lips—I'll cheerfully wait for years to deserve it—do penance on rocks and hills, dales and rivers—nay, court imprisonment for the country's cause. Pray, don't say 'no', Kamakshi—to win you, I'll even risk my life for the freedom of the country if that pleases you."

Kamakshi stood utterly bewildered, motionless like a bird which has wheeled to its highest flights in the sky and knows not its own place or mind.

But outside the walled-in garden the uproar was increasing. Ponnan came running and breathless with a strange look of terror in his face. "Pray,

Mr. Mūḍaliar—it's impossible to be safe here—my words are coming true; events are shaping themselves as I feared. Quite too late to save my master Rangan, and Rajeswari, or Kandan and Sarasvati—they are in the thick of the crowd—the whole mass is seething with excitement, and the slightest friction will bring out the explosion—I've seen many such crowds in my varied life—this's most terrible in its rustic splendour and force."

"Ponna, come to the point, what is the matter?"

"Evidently Rangan will speak—and they are all going to disobey the order—the result will be disaster—the police will open fire and there will be severe *lathi* and bayonet charge—for this is not an urban crowd, and your wild fellows will be afraid of neither steel nor fire. There are ten thousand people in the *maidan* packed like *kola* fish, and another ten thousand outside the walls of the city-gate, shut out by a strong police detachment guarding the entrance. This beautiful open will become shambles in half-an-hour, and blood will flow like river to the sea, alas! for nothing!"

"Well, then, what is it that you say, Ponna?—suggest a way out of the difficulty."

"Let us escape to the sea; that is the only way out—yonder amid the temple ruins on the sea-shore,

a catmaran is waiting for us. Let us escape to the sea before it is too late. In an hour, we can clear ten miles by the coast and the wind is with us—Mr. Mudaliar, pray follow me, and you, Kamakshi.”

“Fie, fie, Ponna, you bring dishonour to your father Vythilinga’s name—he was the bravest man in the Taluk! by common consent. Running away, deserting your master and friends just at the hour when they need you most! Ponna, Kandan too is a remote agnate of mine—though we have lost touch with each other for generations—that’s why I am attached to Karian.—But Kandan perhaps does not know it himself. Well, at this critical hour I should not stand on ceremony. I shall go and see the D.S.P. We are very good friends, though the country’s cause divides us now. Let me think of an honourable way out of this madding crowd—this has far exceeded my expectations; that only shows that there is so much of patriotic feeling in the country. Yes, I must move out immediately, Kamakshi, and pacify this excited throng. Ponna, look to the safety of your sister and try to reach Rangan and Kandan safely—or be here, that’s better.”

“Take care of your steps, Mr. Mudaliar, and in the excitement of the crowd pray don’t do any hasty

deed." Ponna begged as he really wanted to save as many as possible from the impending peril.

When Chockalinga passed out of sight, Kamakshi cried, "Ponna, I can take care of myself in this safe corner. Follow Mr. Mudaliar and guide him throughout. None can protect him better in this hour of peril than you, my brother."

Chockalinga for all his aristocratic ease and laziness was young and brave, and Tranquebar was the soil of his forefathers for over eleven generations, and they were the uncrowned kings of this sea-resort under the Danish rule. Chockalinga felt his virgin pride violated that evening in the unnecessary display of police force. He remembered that his ancestors too were once military chieftains, charged with the guardianship of the marches of the Coleroon. His young blood boiled with pride and indignation.

Chockalinga in this defiant frame of mind, swaggered into the crowd which instinctively opened out a winding passage to him, the premier nobleman of the Taluk. Chockalinga only wanted to see his friend, the D.S.P., who would have been the first to see him under normal circumstances, just to tell the police chief that he would stand guarantee for the peace of the place, and all this police

array and fright was wholly unnecessary and that even if Rangan disobeyed the order the British Raj would not come down.

(6)

Chockalinga approached the entrance to the fort by the northern gate. There was a cordon of Malabar police,—strangers to the land. They did not know him, did not like his aristocratic swagger before the very bayonet-end of their rifles. Chockalinga announced pompously that he wanted to see the D.S.P., and moved on boldly to enter the low gate. One constable, more cheeky than the rest, pushed him back with the ringed end of his *lathi* and shouted, "Keep out of the bayonet range, you burly fool, lest you tempt me to put an inch of cold steel into your rich flesh. Nobody can see the D. S. P. or enter the fort now—" He suitably adjusted his rifle-end for action to carry out the threat.

Nandan, Mookkan and Katteri, Irullan, Karuppan and Irullappan, and Amavasai, Govindan, Pavadai, Nallan, and Karian, grateful for the salt of ages they had eaten, and rich with the loot of twenty thousand *kalams* of paddy but last week, were standing at a respectful and loyal distance with

their herds of men. The moment they saw their master roughly handled, they sprang like wounded tigers, and overpowered the sentry group of half-a-dozen. Meanwhile, Mr. Mudaliar was dragged, carried away to a place of safety by Nallan, Amavasai and Karian.

The police whistle of alarm and distress flew from mouth to mouth disturbing the quiet nap of the D. S. P. and the Khan Bahadur. The enraged crowd began with brick-bats, that lay ready to hand in such profuse heaps all over.

The ponderous Deputy Collector of Mayavaram in his loose shuffling trousers was there ready to quell the riot. He warned the crowd of the apprehended breach of the peace and asked them to disperse in two minutes, or the police would have to use rifle-fire to break up the meeting and disperse the crowd. He spoke aloud in a ponderous voice to the neighbouring banyan tree the words of warning and asked once again the crowd to disperse in two minutes.

How could ten thousand men who had collected there slowly from early dawn disperse in two minutes even at the risk of rifle-fire? And the way out was fully blocked—the raging sea to the east, the fort walls on the south, and a regular pile

of buildings to the north and the west, with the main way out barricaded by the police.. But the Deputy Collector thought only of his imminent duty.

The *lathi* charge came: once, twice, thrice with all the harshness that could be at the end of a ringed stick, and failed. The police then opened fire: once, twice, thrice. Bullets flew in the air like white-ants flying in their bridal hour before death. Terrible cries went up to Heaven. Fortunately, the fort walls were uncomfortably high, and most of the bullets found their way in the air to the orchard that lay on the other side of the *maidan*. Bullets pierced sweet pomegranate-buds, luscious graft mangoes just at their ripening time, fine oranges, and bananas in bending bunches.

Ponnan received a shot at the calf-muscle, but still moved on limping to where Kandan was standing, calm and collected. Still the bullets were flying about, everyone rushing hither and thither. But Rangan and Rajeswari, Kandan and Sarasvati stood their ground with wonderful calm and presence of mind.

Suddenly Kandan cried a soft, mortal cry that came tearing from the depths of his flesh. He staggered to the ground, lifting the right hand to

the heart and pressing it hard. A bullet had struck him very near his heart, just indeed where the lash of the giant in the dream cracked its stroking end. Kandan's kindly heart found room in his dying hour even for fatal lead, the lead that ends life but changes death into the deathless life of a martyr.

"Kanda, Kanda," ten thousand voices cried, and the waves lashed in moaning fury, and the log of wood of the sea tilted to the sky as if in humble prayer.

"My life is over, Rajee—it is a mortal shot—I knew my approaching end even this morning when the full moon poured comfort after the dream, and beckoned me to herself. I won't recover, Rajee. But my life will not have been in vain if only you all carry out our plan, consecrating your life and love for the freedom of the country and the uplift of these down-trodden masses—foodless, homeless and hungry for ages."

Kandan paused a moment and continued with a slight flush of calm in the face, "Yes, Rajee, do marry Ranga; he is a noble soul, and his birth is a gain to our aching land. Chockalinga, on you rests everything, devote your life and wealth for the uplift of the poor—something tells me that ~~Kamakshi~~ will lead you to victory—marry that

sweet, simple girl. Ponna, you too are purified." And Kandan gently stroked Ponna on his back, who kneeled in worship before him touching his feet.

"Ah! Sarasvati, I die peacefully," Kandan turned with great effort towards Sarasvati and said in a low voice, "I die happily; for I'm sure that the country's cause is sure and safe in your hands. None can break you or touch you, not even bullets. Guide our friends and teach them to live the higher life you live—and remember me in your prayers. Ah, ah——" Kandan bore bravely the pain of the coming end.

"Kanda, may we all have your blessings—if this tragic end be the will of God. We will think of no earthly pleasures till the freedom of the country is won; no marital ties till Swaraj is ours," all spoke the same word as if it were the chorus of a song.

Kandan fainted more and more, and they were helpless in the crowd. "I'm sinking—I'm sinking, Rajee, but with peace of mind, Rajee. I feel a little thirsty—will you, Rajee, will you, Sarasvati go and bring me a cup of—" Kandan saw the sea before his very eyes and its endless lapping waters, and craved for a drop of water at his dying moment.

Rajee and Sarasvati ran together to the fresh-water well on the shore and Ponnai followed them limping. But before they could return, Kandan had breathed his last.

"Alas! he died thirsting for water before it could come, alas!" Rajee said in sobbing whispers.

"Alas! he died thirsting for the freedom of his country before it could come; alas!" Sarasvati spoke to the setting sun.

"Let us remember our vow—and work out his will—that will slake in Heaven his thirst—our honest work on earth," Rangan said in a deep voice of resolution, like a man of deeds.

"Kandan has died a patriot-saint. Let his *samadhi* rest by the side of the tank in the very cocoanut garden where the toddy-shop once stood. Let an *ashrama* grow there for rural service, for the uplift and joy of the million poor. Kandan lives the deathless life of a patriot, a martyr," Rajee said, and Sarasvati nodded approval.

CHAPTER XVII

THE EPILOGUE

(1)

A month had passed.

It was a small room on the top flat in the *Swarajya* Office, Broadway, Madras. It was the editorial sanctum. Piles of long, lean, galley-proofs, and reams of waste printed matter, scissored and unscissored, mixed up with the live-sheets for the day were flapping in the wind, welcoming both those who came to take as well as to give. The roar of traffic outside on the road was disturbing the calm of journalistic fluency and vigour, not to mention the interruption of visitors. But the editorial pen went on spilling ink on rough paper.

Except for a dozen pencils with shaved heads of varying degrees of longevity, there was no sign of richness in the room. Everywhere it was ink and lead; no gold, except in the firm and rich spirit of the band of young men who sacrificed a fine career at the bar for the service of the country at the most sacred hour of call.

The sub-editor softly opened the door, and came to the chief, looking grave, with a letter in hand. It was from a correspondent at Tranquebar. The chief read it slowly, and said in a weary voice, "Yes, feature it,—in the leading page. I'll also write a note—Rangan deserves it."

The letter appeared in bold print the same evening, and it ran as follows:

Mr. A. P. Natarajan, M. A., I. C. S., the Special Magistrate in charge of the Tranquebar rioting case, delivered judgment yesterday at 6 p. m. All the accused were convicted.

R. S. Rangaswami, M. A., I. C. S., Bar-at-Law—
one year R. I.

Rajeswari Bai of Bombay—six months S. I.

Sarasvati—six months S. I.

Kamakshi—six months S. I.

Ponnan—one year R. I.

Chockalinga Mudaliar—one year R. I.

Nandan, Mookkan and Katteri; Irullan and Irullappan, and Amavasai; Govindan, Pavadai, Nallan and Karian, and the other seventy-two accused, all belonging to Mr. Mudaliar's *pannai*—
two years R. I. each.

Porkodi Achi, the aged mother of Chockalinga, died the same night broken-hearted at the great

calamity that had befallen her ancient housē and her only son, Chockalinga.

(2)

Who could be the special correspondent of the *Swarajya* ? It was none but Sundaram, the whilom station-master of Akkur. He too was in the crowd that fateful day. The good luck, that was always his, did not desert him in that frightful hour. He escaped both the bullet-fire and the prosecution. The secret glands that gave him a winding, sneaking mode of approach saved him that day, and gave him back the eternal life of the truant that he so dearly loved. From the schoolboy to the wandering youth, from the wandering youth to the young *sadhu*, from the *sadhu* to the signaller, from the signaller to the station-master, from the station-master to the patriot who disobeyed Section 144, from the patriot to the free-lance journalist—what a career of exceeding variety to Sundaram ever since his wedding day!

Yes, genius is disappointed hope and love, the flower and the fruit of intense suffering.

Yes, genius is controlled, sublimated vital energy,

the spark of life that is the same both in the atom and in the star.

Genius at its lower level is truancy and romanticism.

Genius at its highest levels is politics and patriotism, music and poetry, philosophy and religion,—and, above all, spiritual realisation that makes you one with the invisible atom and the twinkling star—
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SOME OPINIONS

1. Mr. Venkataramani writes beautifully about Indian Village Life. I have read books of his for some years and now "Paper Boats" is in its third edition. Charming and accurate descriptions: attractive essays.—*Hamilton Fyfe in the Daily Chronicle.*

2. Mr. Venkataramani is known to a small but discriminating public as the author of some attractive sketches of Indian village life.—*G. T. Garratt in the Nation.*

3. One of the best of Indian writers of to-day is Mr. K. S. Venkataramani.—*Cape Argus.*

4. Mr. Venkataramani is a village prose-poet. He frames a political programme while he plays the lyre.—*The Literary Guide.*

5. An Indian who writes with rare charm and sympathy about his own people.—*J. A. SPENDER in The Changing East.*

Svetaranya Ashrama, Mylapore, Madras

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OPINIONS ON "MURUGAN, THE TILLER"

1. *Lord Haldane* : A little time ago you were so kind as to send me through His Holiness Shri Sankaracharya Swamigal, a copy of your book, *Murugan, The Tiller*. I have now read your volume carefully through. I have been much impressed by the art which you have displayed in the story, and the way in which you have made village life in India live for the reader. The picture has value for the student of native institutions. I have read your story, and have gained not only pleasure but knowledge.

Svetaranya Ashrama, Mylapore, Madras

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2. *Romain Rolland*: I thank you for the volumes that you have been pleased to send me, particularly the last, *Murugan, The Tiller*. I have experienced considerable pleasure in evoking (in my mind the picture of) rustic life which has been half heaven and half dream but a dream which should be the guide and the light of reality. I congratulate you sincerely.

3. *Laurence Binyon*: Thank you so much for *Murugan*. It is very difficult for us to have a vivid, intimate picture of Indian life in our minds; and your story gives me that. There is much beauty in the picture, as well as things which make one think and be sorry. The divorce of human life from Mother Earth is surely a great cause of modern unhappiness, both in East and West. Our balance is upset. But I do not lose hope for the world.

4. *J. A. Spender*: You bring back to me most delightfully the atmosphere of India and give me a sense of Indian life and character which I could not get from any English writer. I hope you will go on, for you have it in your power greatly to help English readers to understand India.

5. *R. B. Cunningham Graham*: Many thanks for the beautiful little idyll of Madrassi life. I know nothing of Indian life but I can see at once that yours is a true picture of it from the inside.

6. *Jean Buhot*: I was truly delighted to receive your new novel. I like it immensely. There is in it a gentle, tender, refined feeling which appeals to me very much, something that is very Indian and is, or was Latin as well.

7. Clear reasoning and obvious sincerity; beautifully chosen phrases, often poetic but never over-sentimental. The delineation of character is masterly. *Murugan* is distinctly a book to read and to think about, whether on holiday or in the study. —*The Review of Reviews*.

8. He brings out with all the simplicity and charm of his earlier work the best sides of Hindu family life.—*The Times Literary Supplement*.

9. The thought is gentle and profound. *Murugan* is more useful than many more pretentious tomes, and very readable.—*Foreign Affairs*.

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1. *Frederic Harrison*: I am much interested in your *Paper Boats* and shall show it to qualified readers with my good word. The English style is graceful and correct and the intimate life of the Indian Village is told with such familiar and sympathetic feeling that it must have the effect of a charming novelty to us in Europe. We are all deeply concerned with the future of India and your book will help to show us how strong is the contrast between the historic spirit of Indian civilization and the present form of our Industrial progress and modern democracy?

2. *William Archer*: Thank you for your *Paper Boats* which I have read with interest and pleasure. I find in your sketches much grace and sincerity of feeling.

3. *Mr. E. V. Lucas*: I have read your *Paper Boats* with very much pleasure. They tell more of India than shelves of more pompous works and they deserve, both for themselves and just now a propaganda to be widely known.

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5. *Sir W. Robertson Nicoll*: I send you my cordial thanks for your book *Paper Boats*. I have read it with much interest. It is written in excellent English and in an admirable spirit. I think I like best the article on the Grandmother. But they are good.

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